THE WINTER FEAST

CHARLES RANN KENNEDY

YC 45646

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

HERDISA

THE WINTERFEAST

BY

CHARLES RANN KENNEDY

AUTHOR OF
"THE SERVANT IN THE HOUSE"

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
SCENES IN THE PLAY

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
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MCMVIII

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GENERAL

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TO

MY WIFE

"HERE HAVE WE SPOKEN BUT A LITTLE WHILE TOGETHER, AND YET MINE HEART HATH DREAMED UPON THEE ALWAYS. . . . THERE WAS A HAUNTING OF THEE ERE EVER I SAW THY FACE. . . . I HAVE KNOWN THEE OTHER WORLDS THAN THIS."

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The frontispiece is from a portrait photograph made by Miss Alice Boughton, and the illustrations are from photographs made by Mr. Charles Hallen

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ORIGINAL CAST OF CHARACTERS

IN

THE WINTERFEAST

BY

CHARLES RANN KENNEDY

AS PRESENTED BY

THE HENRY MILLER ASSOCIATE PLAYERS

AT

THE SAVOY THEATRE, NEW YORK

ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1908

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THORKEL, an old Viking. . Mr. ROBERT CUMMINGS
VALBRAND, his son . . . . . Mr. FRANK MILLS
BJORN, Thorkel's foster son } Mr. WALTER HAMPDEN
OLAF, son to Bjorn . . . }
UFEIG, a priest . . . . . Mr. ARTHUR LEWIS
ODD, a thrall . . . . . Mr. BEN FIELD
HERDISA, wife to Valbrand, Miss EDITH WYNNE MATTHISON
SWANHILD, her daughter . Miss GWLADYS WYNNE

The time is between the hours of seven and ten on the evening of Winter Night's Feast, October 14th, A.D. 1020.

The place is Thorkelsstead, or the homestead of Thorkel, in Icefirth, Iceland.

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THORKEL		An old Viking
VALBRAND * BJORN	Foster-brothers	His son His foster-son
OLAF		Son to Bjorn
UFEIG		A priest
ODD		A thrall
HERDISA		Wife to Valbrand
SWANHILD		Her daughter

For reasons indicated in the text, it is advisable for the actor playing Bjorn to double the part with his son Olaf. Seven actors only, therefore, are required.

The time is between the hours of seven and ten, on the evening of Winter Night's Feast, October 14th, A.D. 1020.

The place is Thorkelsstead, or the homestead of Thorkel, in Icefirth, Iceland.

* Not to be confused with the historical Bjorn Herjulfson, who sailed to Vineland (America) in the year 986 A.D. The tale is imaginary.

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THE SCENE

A substantial-looking wooden interior of the early eleventh century, Scandinavian.

At the back of the stage, a little to left of centre, there is an opening, leading by way of a small porch to the outer door (which is seen). This door is fitted with a large latch, which makes a noise when lifted. To the right of the opening, three steps, extending as far as right flat, give access to the women's bower—a wide, high inner chamber curtained off from the main hall. There is a door in right flat, toward front of the stage, which is approached by three railed-in wooden steps, set sideways up stage, so that those who mount them may face the audience. There is a similar door in left flat, but quite up stage. This also is approached by steps. Below, on the same side, toward the audience, is a huge fireplace, from the upper end of which there juts out into the room a large, high-backed, carved ingle-seat so contrived that its occupants may not be seen from the upper part of the stage.

On the right are preparations for the evening's festival. The table is set lengthwise up and down the stage. The place of honor is the high seat of the house, the pillars of

which are curiously carved with runes and quaint figures; this is set to right of the table, with its back to the flat. Three stools are also set—HERDISA's, at the upper end of the table; SWANHILD's, at the lower; and VALBRAND's, to the right of the high seat. At the commencement of the play the left of the table is free; but afterward it is occupied by the guest seat, an honorable-looking carved chair, first seen at back of stage, between the doorway opening and the bower. A small oak dresser is up stage behind the high seat. A small wooden footstool painted in blue and red is by the right of the ingle-seat. Another stool, the thrall's stool, occupies the other side of the fireplace, near the audience, close to the wall.

Other appurtenances of the room include tapestries seven or eight feet high all round the walls, with conventional pattern, distinguished mainly by the *swastika*, or mark of Thor: battle-axes, bills, byrnies, helms, shields, swords; fishing-gear, such as nets, hooks, harpoons, spears; a couple of oars; trophies of the chase—reindeer antlers, fox-tails, skins of wolves and bears—one a fine Arctic bear-skin (white) across the hearth; a homespun cloak or two of wadmal, hanging up; a spinning-wheel; a quantity of dried meat and stock-fish depending from the roof-beams; a black stock-pot simmering above the fire; and a lamp swinging high over the feast-table. In the doorway there is a lantern.

Of the essential properties of the play the following are seen when the curtain rises: A small Celtic hand-harp

standing on the ground near the audience, just in front of steps, right; knives, platters, drinking-cups, dishes, and a mead-bottle for the feast; an extra platter, etc., on the dresser; a cloak lying on SWANHILD'S stool; the lantern in the doorway, named above; THORKEL'S hat and helm and sword, hanging by the high seat; and VALBRAND'S sword, the haft of which the thrall binds with hemp at the beginning of the play.

Other essential properties, which are brought in, include BJORN'S sword, a sea-shell, an arm-ring, VALBRAND'S cloak, and HERDISA'S cloak.

All three swords mentioned are huge weapons, for the use of two hands; they are highly ornamented, and distinct from one another.

The stage is lit by a red glow from the fire, an amber light from the lamp illuminating the feast-table and the curtains of the bower, and a sickly flicker in the doorway from the lantern. The inside of the bower is dark and mysterious.

THE FIRST ACT

The Guest

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THE WINTERFEAST

THE FIRST ACT

As the curtain rises there are discovered THORKEL, SWANHILD, and the thrall, ODD. The girl sits on a footstool slightly to right of the old man, who is in the ingle-seat. ODD, on the farther side of the hearth, sits mending a sword-haft.

THORKEL. What is thy task, thrall?

ODD. I mend Valbrand's sword, Master Thorkel.

THORKEL. So? How brake he his sword?

ODD. Nay, the sword is good enow. I do but bind it with hemp round the haft—to hold by.

THORKEL. Humph! 'Tis like Valbrand! In my day men were more fain to grip cold iron than hemp.

SWANHILD. My father is no coward, grandfather!

THORKEL. I mock not thy father, child—Valbrand is mine own son; but he was ever more singer than swordsman—a dreamer of dreams, like thee, Swanhild. Well, I love him none the less for that.

SWANHILD. Nor me, grandfather?

THORKEL [patting her head]. Nor thee, little wench! But—I remember the days when men were men here in Iceland, ere the new faith came, and they fell away from Father Odin and old Thor.

SWANHILD [crossing herself at the heathen names]. Let not Priest Ufeig hear thee say as much; nay, nor God, either!

[She gazes thoughtfully into the fire.]

THORKEL. I fear not Ufeig. I am of the old days.

SWANHILD [still gazing]. Grandfather, how long hath my father left off singing songs? Men say he was a great skald once.

THORKEL. Why, these twenty years—thereabout; since he wedded Herdisa, thy mother.

SWANHILD. Whom dost thou blame for that?

THORKEL. I blame — none. Such things come about.

SWANHILD. Did not my mother like song-craft in the house?

THORKEL. Maybe she liked it well enow; but—well, she wedded him, and matters changed somewhat. Sooth, there be greater need than skald-work in this world—strength, a fierce heart, and steadfastness among the folk! Ay, she made a man of Valbrand—though he *do* use hemp with his sword-haft!

SWANHILD. Didst *thou* never deal in songs, and fair tales, and such-like, in thy youth?

THORKEL [glancing keenly down upon her]. H'm! . . . Never but once—once only, in all my life—did the scald-foam hiss in my head; and that once was once too . . . Well, I waken *that* not. 'Tis dead and done with.

ODD [busy with the sword]. So! When Valbrand next hath need of it! . . .

[He eyes it proudly.]

SWANHILD [she has slipped from the stool and now kneels up in the fire-glow]. Never will I be wedded as long as I live! I would not take the song out of a man's mouth for all the world!

THORKEL [laughing]. Mayhap thou mayst light on some lad of thine own mettle—some idle John-a-dreams like thyself.

SWANHILD [radiant]. Oh, grandfather! Dost thou deem that ever such might come about?

ODD [rising]. 'Tis done! Look, Master Thorkel. Is not that fair bound?

[The child sits dreaming as ODD holds the sword over her head.]

THORKEL. Humph! Hemp!

[As ODD hangs up the sword by the end of the ingle-seat the Warn-

ing is heard—a cry, half human, of wind and storm cleft by thunders. Smoke comes from the fire. ODD wheels round, scared.]

ODD. There goes Thor's devil hammer, somewhither!

SWANHILD [crossing herself]. Ssh, Odd!

THORKEL. That was the Warning—what men call the Warning. The winter is not far off.

ODD [standing rooted, his arms limp]. I heard a mad skald once say of the Warning, that if it fell on Winterfeast there was ill-luck a-brewing for some one.

THORKEL. Humph! Skalds! Skalds!

ODD. To-night—*is*—Winterfeast!

SWANHILD [thoughtfully]. Mother hath made griddle-cakes.

Folk say that a maiden may light upon a lover, Winterfeast. He walks in dream, o' Winterfeast.

THORKEL. They say much that be neither here nor there.

SWANHILD. Nay, but I know the rime on't. It runs thus:

"Dreaming yonder
In thy bower,

One doth wander
At the hour
Of Winterfeast:
Seek; and if thou find him,
To thee, Fate shall bind him—
As thou lookst for least."

ODD. I have heard that, too.

[SWANHILD rises with a glad little cry, and skips to the middle of the room.]

THORKEL. Whither away now, madcap?

SWANHILD. To the bower, yonder!

THORKEL. Nay, 'tis cold as death in there, child.

SWANHILD. What, shall I leave him ghosting there alone, without a welcome? See! [She snatches up a shawl on her left.] 'Tis mother's.

THORKEL. Ay, that bower will be the bane of thee yet!

[She dances gayly into the bower. Within, she peeps out with an odd little make-believe of fear, and disappears again. The others follow her movements, THORKEL edging round the ingle-seat to do so.]

THORKEL. A mad little wench! 'Tis Valbrand over again!

[ODD walks slowly to the fire. There he sinks to his knees.]

ODD. The skald said that Fate rides upon the wings of the Warning. How dost thou deem of that, Master Thorkel?

THORKEL. Fate rides another blast than yon, meseems!

ODD. And passes, likewise? Naught left behind?

THORKEL. Nay, no man knows what chance leaf may blow his way upon the breath of Fate.

[There is a single knock at the door. It echoes ominously through the room. Both remain silent. Another knock.]

Who is that knocks so like a thief at the door? Go see, boy.

ODD [having started, pauses]. Shall I take weapon, Master? There hath blown no horn.

THORKEL. Do. Take Valbrand's.

[ODD does so. As he nears the door, a third knock sounds. He halts, trembling.]

Open, boy.

[ODD opens the door. UFEIG comes

in. He is a wry old man, his face wrinkled with evil and age; his right arm hangs limp—it is withered; there is a red scar across his head, and he is a little bent. He is robed as a priest. ODD draws back, sword raised, facing him.]

ODD [scared]. 'Tis old Ufeig—none but old Ufeig.

UFEIG. Yea—and thy priest!

[He points to the sword with his left hand, across his body.]

ODD. Thou gavest no warning, father.

[The sword-point clanks mechanically to the ground.]

UFEIG. No warning, eh? Oh-ho-ho! What was that erewhile? Didst not hear it—the storm-blast coming up from over the sea, with tempest?

ODD [aghast]. Ay, Priest Ufeig, and didst thou raise yon? [Under his breath.] Men say thou hast a devil, and canst cast spells!

UFEIG. Ha! Then upon thee I . . .

[ODD shivers beneath that awful left hand.]

So! 'Tis well; thou learn a godly fear.

THORKEL. If thou hast aught to say, speak to *me*. He is but a boy.

UFEIG. Ah, mine old warrior's voice!

[He comes down to the corner of the ingle-seat.]

Thou hast no fear of me, hast thou, Thorkel?

THORKEL. I trow not! What dost thou here?

UFEIG. I have a little errand with thee, Thorkel; yea, and a little gift, too—a Winterfeast gift; but that is not from me; 'tis from—another; ay. Mine own errand with thee will I deal with first.

THORKEL. How if I will not hear thee?

UFEIG. Thou wilt hear me. 'Shall I sit, Thorkel?

THORKEL [hesitating]. I know thee not, with that shaven face of thine!

UFEIG. Pough! There be one tuft left, Thorkel. Thy kinsfolk call me Priest Goat-face when they would mock me.

THORKEL [derisively]. Ay, thou hadst more wagging at thy chin when thou wert priest of Thor!

UFEIG [crossing himself complacently]. I am changed since.

THORKEL. Thou didst name some—some gift . . .

UFEIG. Nay, but mine *own* errand first.

THORKEL [roughly]. Well, come to't, and quickly. I have no time for thee.'

UFEIG. I would talk of that old tale of thine which thou didst spin twenty years ago, Thorkel—*that*

day when thou wert come from Vineland over the seas. 'Twas the only time in all thy life that thou wert known to play the skald.

[A curious change comes over THORKEL.]

Dost thou hear me; or [glancing round] do I not speak loud enow for thee?

THORKEL. Ssh! What canst thou have to say—of *that?*

UFEIG. *All that there is to know of it, I know.* Shall I now sit with thee a little?

THORKEL. Odd! Go, look an thou can spy thy master coming. 'Tis about his time.

[ODD hangs up the sword in its place.]

Take lantern with thee; 'tis dark; the light will aid him.

[ODD goes out with the doorway lantern. THORKEL motions UFEIG to his left.]

THORKEL. 'Tis the first time I have ever suffered thee within my doors.

UFEIG [he stands warming his hands at the fire]. Tell me, doth Valbrand know?

THORKEL. He heard the tale as I spake it. He knows naught else.

UFEIG. Ah! He should be told.

THORKEL. How so?

UFEIG. Doth it not touch him closely?

THORKEL. He hath trouble enow of his own already, one way and another.

UFEIG. H'm! Folk *say* that there be more love his side of the bed than Herdisa's; and [the other moves uneasily]—and that she yet hath more than half a thought for that old cast-off lover of hers, whom thou . . .

THORKEL. She hath forgot *him*, long ago!

UFEIG. The folk say otherwise.

THORKEL. They lie!

UFEIG. Eh? How that must anger *thee*, Thorkel!

[THORKEL making no answer, the other sits down, and continues, pleasantly.]

Ah!

To think, now, how we two old enemies should be sitting here so friendly, side by side, talking in thy hearth-glow this Winterfeast! And all for what? Why, because those years ago thou wouldst go match-making, and meddling with tales and such-like follies, like a skald.

THORKEL. No more of that! Come to thine errand.

UFEIG. Ay, the warfare we have had together, thou and I, days gone by! Thou wert ever best man, I will say that for thee. Three great hurts have I had of thee, all told. Dost thou remember cleaving me through the brain-pan, here? I was nigh done for: ay, 'twas a lucky miss that time.

THORKEL. 'Twas the trolls saved thee!

UFEIG. Humph! And once again, when thou brakest into my breast—here, by the heart—'tis all of a scab there yet: 'tis smarting now. This too, was thine, my withered arm [he lifts it with his left hand]—all thy work!

And to think, that after all this warfare there should be made a PEACE betwixt us, at the last!

THORKEL. A peace! Talkest thou of peace?

UFEIG. Doth not thy tale stretch so far?

THORKEL. There shall be no such thing betwixt thee and me, whiles yet I live!

UFEIG [musingly]. Nay, then, what might hap, an Herdisa and I gat talking together?

THORKEL [fiercely clutching him]. Thou durst not tell her!

UFEIG [wincing]. 'Tis the sore breast, Thorkel!

THORKEL. I tell thee, thou dog, I will not have Herdisa know!

UFEIG. Off, thou fool! . . .

She shall *not* know. We will keep it hidden among us, we three men together.

THORKEL. Three? What other man may be in this?

UFEIG. Valbrand, thy son. He must be told to-night. ' Doth that seem so fearful to thee?

THORKEL. Sure, 'tis hell within thee, stirring!

UFEIG. I know not that. I feel it here—at my heart. '

[A horn is sounded outside.]

What was yon?

THORKEL. 'Tis Valbrand come home from the hills!

UFEIG [eying him]. Well? . . .

THORKEL. He will lose his peace forever.

UFEIG. He will hold Herdisa.

THORKEL. He will hate me for it all my days.

UFEIG. Better Valbrand hate thee, than Herdisa him. Well? . . .

THORKEL [bitterly]. Thou shalt have thy PEACE.

UFEIG. Handsel me, thereon.

[They rise ceremonially to give handsel. UFEIG stands facing the audience; THORKEL, a little down stage, faces him.]

THORKEL. Reach me forth thy right hand.

UFEIG. 'Tis withered, Thorkel. Lift it thou.

[THORKEL does so.]

THORKEL. Peace, betwixt thee and me.

[They resume their seats.]

Tell me, how didst thou come to learn . . . ?

UFEIG. Thou shalt hear all in good time. Ssh! Valbrand! . . .

[VALBRAND enters, closely followed by ODD.]

VALBRAND. Come in, boy. Ah! Such a blustering day as it hath been! [He hangs up his cloak.] Where is Herdisa?

ODD. She is over to neighbor Gunnhild's with a bake of griddles.

VALBRAND. Ho, Winterfeast, eh? *Thou* wilt see thy skin full to-night, I warrant thee! Ha-ha-ha! Well, I blame thee not. Come, get thee round to the byre; there is much work yonder, and I would have all done up ere the feast. I will but thaw my bones, and join thee, presently. Good lad! [He watches him out.] H'm!

[ODD goes out.]

Well, old father [coming down to ingle], and how is Winterfeast using thee, eh?

How now! Priest Ufeig! Father . . .

UFEIG. Come, friend, speak to thy son.

VALBRAND. Friend! Did I hear thee call him *Friend?*

UFEIG. Yea, or thou hast no ear. Harkee, Valbrand! We have made Peace. How doth that like thee?

VALBRAND. Wouldst thou have truth?

UFEIG [dryly]. Yea, I love truth.

VALBRAND. Why then, Priest, I like it marvellous ill! Methinks a Peace with thee must needs have some huge lie at bottom on't!

UFEIG [inexpressibly shocked]. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh! [Nudging THORKEL]. Come, begin, warrior.

THORKEL. Sit thee down, Valbrand.

[VALBRAND brings SWANHILD'S stool from the table, and places it to right of ingle-seat, a little forward. He sits.]

My son, carry thy mind back a twenty years. Dost thou remember that day I sailed for Vineland—I and thy foster-brother Bjorn?

VALBRAND. I am not like to forget.

THORKEL. Two things there were that drave me forth that day. Of the one, thou knowest: Iceland was become a nest of niddering priests; I had no call to stay here. There was yet other reason for my going.

VALBRAND. And what was that?

THORKEL. It was thou, my son — yea, thou. Thou wert sick to the heart for Herdisa: and naught mightst thou do all the day long for love of her but sing thy songs and woo her with fair words. But she— Do I pain thee, son?

VALBRAND. 'Tis in the tale, father. Say on.

THORKEL. She would not look on thee. Skalds and skald-songs were but a mock to her; she would have none but a warrior for her mate, she said; and ever as she spake she turned her thoughts upon thy foster-brother.

UFEIG. Ay, all the dale knew that!

VALBRAND. Bjorn spake scarce a word to her at any time.

UFEIG. That was for thy sake, Valbrand. He was a fool.

THORKEL. The hour was come to test thee. I hated that she and all the folk should call thee coward. That year the tidings came of Vineland, westaway yonder, over the seas. I fitted out a ship; and when all was dight and fair I called a feast, and cried for men to join me. Thou alone stoodst niddering; thine eyes were bent upon Herdisa. She saw thee not; for Bjorn set sail with me. [Passionately.] My son, why wilt thou still sit silent? Hast

no blood? Dost thou not remember that night of the Feast, and Herdisa's dealing with thy foster-brother?

VALBRAND. I remember!

THORKEL. Stood there glorying in Bjorn, whiles all around the people scoffed at thee! Gave him the very ring from off her arm, and pledged her love to him, unsought, unasked . . .

UFEIG. Ay, that was the point—*Unasked!* Folk afterward said that it was a bold matter for a maid to give her heart, *unasked!*

VALBRAND [darkly]. Bjorn took the ring in silence. He spake no word.

UFEIG. Ay, a fool!

THORKEL. That night mine eyes dreamed blood; but whether for love of thee or hate of Bjorn I know not. On the morrow we sailed.

VALBRAND. Why wilt thou wake that old dead bitterness? What part hath it in the Peace ye twain have set up together?

THORKEL. My son, if I tell thee, thou wilt . . . Nay, I can say no more! Tell him thou.

UFEIG. That will I, and swiftly:

Harkee, Valbrand! Out of all that company of men which fared forth to Vineland that day, only two remained alive to tell the tale.

THORKEL. Two?

UFEIG. Yea: Bjorn, left in Vineland, yonder; and thou, here in Iceland.

THORKEL. Humph! He will be dead by now.

UFEIG. Humph! That would leave only thee. Anywise, only thee there was to tell the tale in Iceland.

VALBRAND. Well, he told it! 'Twas a mighty tale, well spoken, no songman though he be. I hear the echo of the people's praise yet ringing in the rafters whiles he spake it!

UFEIG. I was not by, but heard tell thereof. Did it not shame Bjorn somewhat?

VALBRAND [hotly]. The shame was Bjorn's own!

UFEIG [quietly]. Ay, so thy father said.

VALBRAND. There was Bjorn's own word against him!

UFEIG. Ay, what word was that?

VALBRAND. Thou hast heard. That he spake by mouth of my father.

UFEIG. What spake he by—mouth of thy father?

VALBRAND. Why, *the mocking message he sent Herdisa!* [Fiercely.] What hast thou to say to that?

UFEIG [slowly]. I have but two things to say to that, Valbrand. First, that message *won for thee thy wife*—

VALBRAND. Ha!

UFEIG. And second—it was a LIE.

VALBRAND. PRIEST!

UFEIG [striking like a serpent]. ASK THY FATHER.

[VALBRAND fears to look at his father!
When he does the worst is confirmed.]

VALBRAND [gasping]. Father! . . .

THORKEL [in a low, broken voice]. I did it for thee, my son.

Hast thou no word, Valbrand? 'Twas for thee. Thou wert the child of my blood.

VALBRAND. Yea, thy blood is in me. Mind me not of that.

THORKEL. Thou shalt curse me for it, if thou wilt. My son, curse me.

VALBRAND. Curse thee? Nay, that I cannot, either. I never learned. I am no warrior.

UFEIG [cheerfully]. And now, how best to hide this matter from Herdisa!

VALBRAND. What, I! I help to hide it! Help him keep his lie!

THORKEL. Valbrand! Thou wilt wreck her soul if thou speak!

UFEIG. Psh! He will wreck us all!

THORKEL. It will cost thee so little, son, not to speak; naught it hath cost me.

VALBRAND. It will cost me a lie! Dost thou hear? A lie!

UFEIG. What hath she had in her heart for thee all these years but a lie? Her change from Bjorn to thee was marvellous swift!

VALBRAND. I have won her a thousand times since then!

UFEIG. Then keep her, thou fool! Keep her!

VALBRAND. How? By a lie?

UFEIG [testily]. Nay, by silence! Thorkel, why didst thou breed such a fool? He angers me. . . . Think of thy child!

VALBRAND. Oh! I am blown hither and thither, like a leaf!

[He sits staring before him. They watch him closely as they speak.]

THORKEL. The priest saith truth, son—*Silence:* that is the best rede. Why break her peace?

UFEIG. The lie is not even thine.

THORKEL. 'Tis so long ago. He will be dead by now. Count him dead by now.

UFEIG. In *thee* it will be *no* lie.

THORKEL. *He* was thy greatest fear, all said and done!

UFEIG. 'Tis a kind of truth—in thee.

THORKEL. Why, we have made too much on't.

Harkee! Bjorn is dead; my heart saith so; hate hath slain him many times. 'Tis known to none other in the world, save thee and me and old Priest Ufeig here.

VALBRAND [suspiciously]. And *thou*, Priest? What wilt thou do?

UFEIG [moving to Valbrand's left]. Thy father, there, hath handselled me Peace. Handsel me, thou also, and no man shall know aught from me.

VALBRAND. So: lie engenders lie!

UFEIG. 'Tis but thy first, Valbrand.

[VALBRAND rises and takes UFEIG's hand, which the latter points to.]

VALBRAND [tonelessly]. Peace betwixt thee and me.

UFEIG. Now is there high oath sworn betwixt our houses. If aught should hap to strengthen your hands hereafter I stand free. Betwixt us there lies a great peace!

VALBRAND. Let me not find thee here when I come back from the byre.

[He moves heavily up the stage. Once he sways slightly, like a drunken man. At the door he wavers, but leaves silently. UFEIG watches his exit with a deep smile.]

UFEIG. That, then, is mine own errand with thee.

"BETWIXT US THERE LIES A GREAT PEACE!"

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But I have more: A GIFT for thee—another's, not mine own.

THORKEL [absently]. Ay, thou saidst so erewhile.

UFEIG. There is a ship newly come to Reekfirth, up in the north yonder. I was there two days ago. Humph! a fair ship once, maybe, but now much weathered out on the high seas. Men said there was some oath aboard her, that either she should touch Iceland by Winterfeast or be torn to rags.

She was torn to rags; but [he pauses] she reached Iceland.

THORKEL. That was well sworn. Brave men aboard her, belike.

UFEIG. Yea. I spake with one of them. He was a stranger. He would be here—in these parts—by Winterfeast.

THORKEL [casually]. Ay, there be many that come and go, in Icefirth.

UFEIG [with quiet intention]. Ay, and yet others, that GO, and COME AGAIN.

[THORKEL'S attention is arrested.]

THORKEL. A stranger to thee, sayst thou. Did he know *thee*, in any wise?

UFEIG. He made no sign thereof; and I have been shaven now nigh—twenty years.

THORKEL. Hast any inkling of him?

UFEIG. Now thou askest, mayhap there was some slight echo in the VOICE which . . . Eh?

THORKEL. What! Big and deep-baying, like the shout of thunder?

UFEIG. *'Twas* much like thunder, but held low a little, as before the storm. He sent thee this Gift.

[He gives it to him.]

THORKEL. A sea-shell: 'tis naught but a sea-sh . . .

UFEIG. What! Hast thou known its like before?

THORKEL. Its like—ay; its like!

UFEIG. Not hereabout.

THORKEL. Nay, but in Vineland yonder, over the great sea!

UFEIG. Humph!

THORKEL. What spake the Stranger?

UFEIG. For thee, but four words.

THORKEL. And they?

UFEIG. *Greetings to thee*, SKALD.

THORKEL. Skald! [He rises, white with rage.] Blind that I have been! Thou hast already . . .

UFEIG. The Peace, Thorkel! Remember! The Peace!

[THORKEL sinks back, impotent with rage.]

Now at the last do I deem that thou hast paid in

full for my cloven brain-pan: ay, and for the scab here, likewise.

I have one hurt left.

[He touches his arm. In the doorway he has a final sting.]

A joyful Winterfeast to thee!

[He goes out into the darkness. THORKEL is left staring at the shell.]

THORKEL. 'Tis Fate! 'Tis Fate!

Perchance, even this very night . . .

I never feared him till now.

There will be naught in his heart but hate for me—naught but hate.

SKALD, he said: Yea, *Greetings to thee, skald!*

Ay, Fate! Fate!

[HERDISA enters. She is wrapped in a long cloak. She takes it off, as she speaks. She is strangely excited.]

HERDISA. Thorkel! Thorkel! Art thou there, Thorkel?

THORKEL. Is it thou, Herdisa? Where hast thou been all this while?

HERDISA. Out in the dark there. Ay, in the dark. Thorkel, are we alone?

[She comes to him.]

THORKEL. Herdisa! My daughter! Why, how

pale thou art; and thy hand—how cold: 'tis almost . . . Come, sit thee down.

[He helps her to the stool.]

Ay, and trembling all over, like a winter-driven sea-bird!

HERDISA. 'Tis the ice-blast and—the storm out yonder!

THORKEL. 'Tis calm again now; the storm hath passed.

HERDISA. Mayhap it but holds off for a while!

THORKEL. There is more in thy mind than thy speech bewrays. Tell me, Herdisa, what hast thou seen out yonder?

HERDISA [her eyes dilating]. I have *seen* naught!

THORKEL. Then what might have happed to fright thee so?

HERDISA. It was—a VOICE!

THORKEL [startled]. A voice! Tell me thereof.

HERDISA. I left neighbor Gunnhild's an hour ago. I was down by the foreshore yonder; there where folk stand to watch the great ships sail forth and away down the fiord.

THORKEL. Thou art always thither these days.

HERDISA. Yea, and on a night like this . . .

THORKEL. I know, I know; the seas chime well with thy restless heart, Herdisa.

HERDISA. There was I, to-night. Then came the Warning. Didst thou hear it? From over the far seas it came, howling like the Wives of Death! I never heard them cry so clear before! As I fell back, before the blast, I felt the trailing of their skirts upon my face, smelt the loathly blood-scent of their breathing.

Louder and louder the great cry rose, blended with thunders; mine ear-drums trembled. Then—amidmost of the rack there came forth a mightier sound than all. It was as THE VOICE OF ONE LONG DEAD!

Thrice he cried. His words: *I have lost thee, lost thee, lost thee!* And as the Warning died away in long-drawn sobbing beyond the uplands, methought I still might hear an echo of that anguish: *Lost thee! Lost!*

[She sits gazing darkly before her.]

THORKEL. Maybe 'twas but thy fancy—thy fevered heart, and the tempest yonder . . .

HERDISA. So deemed I as I groped my way hitherward through the rising mist; but on the crag-brow yonder, lo! another voice to mock me. It cried: *Where art thou now, Bjorn? Bjorn Asmundsson, where art thou—now?*

[Her voice has sunk to a whisper. There is a short, tense silence.]

THORKEL. How if he were nigh, indeed? What wouldst thou do?

HERDISA. 'Tis a dead man we talk on.

THORKEL. What wouldst thou do an he came hither, to this house, to-night?

HERDISA [slowly]. What would I do? What wouldst thou have me do? Welcome him with smiles and blushing gladness, like a bride?

THORKEL. Welcome! Ay, that likes me. It would disarm him somewhat—welcome.

HERDISA. I meant not thy meaning; yet thou art right; it likes me also. It had been a fair beginning!

THORKEL. Yea, best rede every way; he should find thee proud; there would be a kind of pride in that.

HERDISA. He should not have found me lacking therein!

THORKEL. Then for the rest— Silence, as to things gone by.

HERDISA. Ha, that were thy counsel— Silence!

THORKEL. There is but little help in speech. Things get said which were better left to die; and, after all, 'tis twenty years now, and . . .

HERDISA. 'Tis not so long but I remember!

THORKEL. Why, then, how wouldst thou deal with him an he came?

HERDISA. *Flout him back overseas again, even as he flouted me that day in Vineland!*

THORKEL. Nay, not that way, not that way!

HERDISA. What more bitter hate wouldst thou devise?

THORKEL. None! Thou wouldst but play *his* tune with *thee!* Hate would there be in his heart; and hate would he look for . . .

HERDISA. And why not hate for hate?

THORKEL. Yea, but buried deep in thy heart, unspoken!

HERDISA. He should have found me bitter, both ways!

THORKEL [excitedly]. He will but look for that! Look to find thee bitter! He will come here, guile on his tongue, and . . .

HERDISA. *Will! Will* come! Talk we not of dead men, and mouthless voices of the storm?

THORKEL. Not so, by the blood of Baldur!

Hearken! And hold thine heart like iron!—

Bjorn Asmundsson comes hither to-night, indeed!

HERDISA. Ha! 'Tis a lie!

THORKEL. I would it were so!

HERDISA. What! The truth, then!

THORKEL. Ay.

HERDISA [slowly rising, an awful fire in her eyes]. Ah! Thou pitying! After all these years! At last! At last!

THORKEL. Herdisa! Herdisa! What wilt thou do?

HERDISA. Why, dight me, and make ready to give *welcome* to thy foster-son!

SWANHILD [within]. Grandfather! Grandfather!

THORKEL. Peace! The child!

[HERDISA stands immovable, as though carved in stone. She faces the audience. SWANHILD re-enters from the bower.]

SWANHILD. Grandfather! I have seen him!

[She runs across and stands between them.]

THORKEL [lost in his own thoughts]. Hast thou, child?

SWANHILD. I fell asleep, and saw him walk in fantasy.

THORKEL. Ay, ay, a dream.

SWANHILD. Some dreams be more wide-wakeful than we look for!

HERDISA. Whom dost thou talk of, little one?

SWANHILD. Hath he not told thee? Why, a

lover! He came, as folk say spirits rise and look on those they love!

HERDISA. How! As from the dead?

SWANHILD [gravely]. *'Tis* a kind of death—slumber!

HERDISA. Nay, then, let him not wake from that great silence! Let dead souls bide where they be and vex us not!

SWANHILD. Nay, that is unkindness of thee, mother!

HERDISA [embracing her]. How, to *thee?* I would not hurt my little ewe-lamb for all the world!

SWANHILD. A lover should be welcome!

HERDISA. What, thou too! Then, welcome shall he be, even though he come this very hour! We will make ready for him now.

SWANHILD [radiant]. Mother! Dost thou mean it?

THORKEL. Have a care, Herdisa!

SWANHILD. Tush! 'Tis but a game, grandfather. I know 'tis but a game; and yet, if it should prove indeed . . .

HERDISA. Therefore, set thou one more platter on the table.

SWANHILD [gleefully doing so]. Yea, yea, mother! And a knife, and a cup to drink from! . . .

THORKEL. Have a care thy game end not in mockery, Herdisa!

HERDISA. 'Tis that end I look for. [To SWANHILD.] Next, drag thou the guest seat yonder. Let it face the high place where Thorkel shall sit, that the guest may be seen of all! He shall not lack for welcome an he come!

[VALBRAND re-enters as SWANHILD does so.]

SWANHILD [joyously]. Welcome to Winterfeast, father!

VALBRAND. Ay, ay, little bird! Hello! The guest seat! Who comes?

SWANHILD. Ah! 'Tis a secret! My mother bade me set.

VALBRAND. So? Wife . . .

HERDISA. 'Tis Winterfeast. Best be ready.

VALBRAND. Dost thou look for a guest? Dost thou?

HERDISA [hesitating]. None that I know on, for sure.

VALBRAND. Why, then, set for shadows! Tush! Take away!

[ODD comes in. He stands up at the door.]

THORKEL. Perchance, if one came, a little welcome . . .

VALBRAND [bitingly]. I crave no merry-making here to-night! Dost *thou?* Take away!

ODD. So please thee, master, there is a man coming up by the dale there.

HERDISA. How—a man!

[She shrinks into the ingle. VALBRAND notes the movement.]

VALBRAND. Humph! Leave the seat. Who may it be?

[A horn sounds outside. THORKEL rises; HERDISA looks scared; VALBRAND perplexed. SWANHILD flames to a rapture.]

SWANHILD. Mother! . . .

[VALBRAND glances from her to HERDISA. The latch of the door is tried.]

VALBRAND. Odd!

[ODD opens the door. There enters a tall, handsome, bearded, somewhat grizzled warrior. He bears a naked sword. Striding to the middle of the room, he regards VALBRAND quizzically. HERDISA and THORKEL are hidden in the ingle.]

A stranger!

SWANHILD [down stage, to the right]. Not he!

BJORN. Is there harborage here for a wayfaring guest to-night?

VALBRAND. Comest thou — in warfare or — in friending?

BJORN [whimsically]. As thou wilt! I have a sword here, an thou wilt fight me!

Am I not welcome? I had thought to be looked for.

VALBRAND [gasping]. I know not yet what name to call thee by.

BJORN [handing him his sword]. Thou wilt find it nicked on the haft there.

[VALBRAND reads, and drops the sword.]

VALBRAND. 'Tis that I gave . . .

BJORN. Ah! My foster-brother! My foster-brother!

VALBRAND. Thou art much changed. Thy beard —thy . . .

BJORN. Well, hast no welcome for me? There is little in thy face as yet, meseems!

VALBRAND. Nay, I am glad enow. 'Tis but dazed —here! [He presses his brow.] After all these years, we—we did not look for thee. We . . .

[He stands fascinated by the guest seat.]

SWANHILD. 'Twas well my mother bade me set!

BJORN. What! Herdisa! Ay, she would remem-

"IS ALL WELL WITH THEE, BJORN ASMUNDSSON?"

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ber me! Where is she? Where? . . . Ah, thou! How fair, how fair to find—thee!

[They stand looking at one another.]

Hast thou no word of greeting for thine old friend?

HERDISA. Is all well with thee, Bjorn Asmundsson?

[THORKEL stands apprehensive in the ingle.]

[FIRST PICTURE. As above.

[SECOND PICTURE. Bjorn embracing his foster-father. Thorkel with a scared face.

[THIRD PICTURE. All seated at the supper-table, as at the beginning of the second act.]

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The Bread of Sinfiotli's Baking

THE SECOND ACT

The scene remains unchanged.

SWANHILD's stool has been moved back again to its place at the lower end of the table. BJORN's sword still lies on the floor, near front.

Supper is over, and the ale-joyance begun. THORKEL sits in the high seat; opposite him, in the guest seat, BJORN —the seat pushed back a little from the table; and he faces the audience. Behind him, at upper end of table, sits HERDISA; at lower end, SWANHILD, facing toward BJORN; VALBRAND is to right of his father and on the same side of the table. ODD waits upon them with the mead-bottle.

VALBRAND. More drink there, Odd!

BJORN. Valbrand hath mended! Time was he had no more head for the mead than a babe. He hath played toss-pot enow to-night for us all!

VALBRAND [hotly]. I have drunk no more than thou!

BJORN [jovially]. Not! Why, thou hast the throat of Hecla! Here, boy!

[Holding out his cup to ODD.]

He shames me!

Now! I will drink thy blood dry ere I cry me beaten by thee!

VALBRAND. Take thou care I drink not thine first!

BJORN. A challenge! I take thee! Ply him, thrall! Herdisa, here, shall sit and judge betwixt us. Wilt thou, Herdisa?

HERDISA. What, sit and weigh you twain, the one against the other?

BJORN. Ay, if thou wilt. So, the cups be full! To it, brother!

VALBRAND. Nay, by Heaven! I will not drink with thee! Weigh him with some other!

BJORN [half angrily]. Ho-ho! Foster-bro . . .

SWANHILD [simultaneously]. Guest! I pray . . .

[She runs to his side and turns, facing her father.]

My father drinks but little at any time.

BJORN [after a moment's irresolution]. Well, I will not press thee, for I see thou art the old Valbrand—moody as ever!

VALBRAND. Ay, moody, call it!

[SWANHILD moves down to ODD, left, and points to the mead-bottle, whispering. Her back is to BJORN for a while.]

BJORN. Herdisa, thou hast become good huswife since I saw thee last. Never have I tasted feast more welcome. And thy mead! [He drinks.] Ah! 'Tis a ripe brew! [Drinks again.] And thou thyself art grown more fair than ever!

HERDISA. 'Tis the gladness of seeing thee again, Bjorn Asmundsson.

BJORN. I would fain think so; and, indeed, thy kindness makes me bold. I would crave yet more of thee by-and-by.

HERDISA. Thou shalt have yet more than thy craving.

BJORN [indicating SWANHILD]. Yea, but by-and-by, dost understand? By-and-by. Tut! 'Tis secret yet! There be one too many of us here to speak out now.

VALBRAND [whose face has been toward audience]. Ha!

BJORN. What ails him now? More moods, eh? Well, I say naught. 'Tis the skald's way, I guess.

VALBRAND. Do not thou call me skald!

BJORN. What else shall I call thee, if not skald? I deem a man may call cat *cat*, and thee, skald!

SWANHILD. My father hath not sung in this house a twenty years. My grandsire said so.

BJORN. What! Is that so, Thorkel?

THORKEL. He hath had other work to do.

BJORN. Nay, but thine *own* work, lad! Herdisa, what hast thou been doing with him all these days?

VALBRAND [savagely]. She hath made me a mighty warrior, like thee!

BJORN. What—*Thou!* Herdisa, is this truth?

HERDISA. Like thee—ay.

BJORN. Nay, I meant not that; but . . . A *warrior! Valbrand!*

HERDISA. How else might we keep alive thy memory among us?

SWANHILD. 'Tis truth, Bjorn. My father hath done many brave deeds! Look thou, yonder is his sword. Odd, bring it.

[He does so. BJORN takes it. SWANHILD stands between them, slightly back.]

ODD. See, Master. With this he hath slain many a man.

BJORN [holding it out, arm's-length]. Humph! 'Tis a good blade! This might kill a man, well! Eh! What is this? On the haft, here?

ODD. 'Tis hemp to hold by. 'Twas I who . . .

BJORN [outraged]. What! Hemp! Hemp to . . .

SWANHILD [quickly]. 'Tis gentler holding, Bjorn.

[VALBRAND has risen, cup in hand.]

BJORN [perceiving]. Ay, ay, ay; a good device!

[VALBRAND drains his cup and dashes it angrily to the ground. He then moves unsteadily toward the ingle. BJORN follows the action with surprise.]

BJORN. So, so, so, warrior!

VALBRAND [turning]. How! Doth that bite thee so?

BJORN. What, that thou art a warrior, Valbrand?

VALBRAND. Yea, I know thy deeds shone fairer, when I was but a skald!

BJORN [gently]. Did they so? 'Twas the skald that I loved, brother.

VALBRAND. Ha! 'Tis no odds!

[He goes to ingle and sits down, lost in bitter thought.]

BJORN. Herdisa, thou hast done ill to let my foster-brother change thus. Nay, I say it; and, sooth, ye both be dear to me.

HERDISA [with quiet irony]. Thou wert too far away for me to seek thy counsel.

[SWANHILD takes her father's place at the table. ODD puts by the sword.]

BJORN. I loved those songs of Valbrand's. What

wanted he with deeds and rage and hatred—yea, and blood upon his hands? 'Twas the fire that spake in him! Why sought he blood to quench it?

SWANHILD. Were my father's songs so dear to thee, Bjorn? I never heard my father sing.

BJORN. Nay, an he have forgot the craft, how should he teach them thee?

SWANHILD. Hast thou remembered any of them?

BJORN. Yea, and sang them many a time to—to ONE I LOVED in Vineland.

[A silence. Then HERDISA speaks curiously.]

HERDISA. So, thou hast had company with thee, out yonder?

BJORN. Yea, but I had meant to tell thee of that when thy little maid was abed; and yet . . .

Well, I see not why . . .

HERDISA [hiding some emotion]. We wait to hear thee.

BJORN. First, I must tell thee, there was a certain fair woman yonder—the daughter of the Red Folk's king. 'Twas for her sake I gat left behind in Vineland. Well, Thorkel will have told thee that; 'tis not for me to vaunt myself . . .

HERDISA. *Vaunt* thyself!

BJORN. Why, hath he not told thee?

HERDISA [with veiled irony]. Yea, he sang thy praises!

BJORN. Tut! What other could I do? 'Twas naught! By Valhal! we had known too sore the ruthless hatred of those fierce, red-faced men the while they held us captive in their booths. One by one they took us, every other day, and slew us to their gods—ay, every other day, one man! Last of all, Thorkel and I alone remained. Then came that woman in the night, unbound our bonds, and led us to our ship. Aboard, we strove to bring her with us; but she slipped our hands and fled into the woods. What might I do? I could not leave her there to taste the bloody fury of her kin. I left a word for thee with Thorkel, lest . . . I followed her. I had not been a man else.

When I had found her, and would return, there were the Red Folk pressed upon the shore, and the ship set sail without me.

HERDISA [unbelievingly]. Nay, then, why not vaunt thyself indeed! 'Tis a gentle tale—told most like a skald! Thorkel had not half thy gift the day he spake it.

BJORN. Tush, tush! 'Tis naught! Speak not of it!

HERDISA. So, then, thy songs in Vineland . . .

BJORN. I come to that.

To the north we fled, through many perils. 'Twas but that once I saved her life. Mine she saved seven times, all told. Afterward, I lived with her a twelvemonth; and then she died. She was exceeding fair, and loved me much. BY HER I HAD . . .

[He breaks off, lost in some deep thought.]

HERDISA. Yea, what hadst thou by her?

BJORN. Why, all the joy and comfort of my many years out yonder!

HERDISA. By the—red woman?

BJORN. By the red woman—ay. . . . [To SWANHILD]. Tell me, child, hast thou e'er been spoken for in wedlock?

SWANHILD. I am too young. My father could ill spare to lose me yet awhile.

BJORN [thoughtfully]. A man might ill spare that at any time—to lose his child!

SWANHILD [naïvely]. I am useful about the house here.

BJORN. I warrant thee! So, then—no lover in thine heart, as yet?

SWANHILD. In mine *heart?* Nay, I said not that.

BJORN [disappointed]. What! Thou hast? Already?

SWANHILD. I know not how to answer thee. I ne'er set eyes upon him in my life, and yet I looked for him to-night!

BJORN. How! Ne'er set eyes upon him, and . . .

SWANHILD. 'Twas in the bower yonder that he came!

BJORN. The bower!

SWANHILD. Yea, showed himself in dream to me!

BJORN [his anxiety gone]. Oh—a dream! A dream!

SWANHILD. Yea, but *true* for all that! I saw him plain before mine eyes, as—as I see thee now! . . . Oh, Bjorn! . . . I never noted it before! . . .

BJORN. Why, how now?

SWANHILD. He was as like to thee as . . . Yea, an thou wert younger, and thy beard away . . .

BJORN. What! Like me? Child, thou movest me!

SWANHILD. He might have been thy very . . .

BJORN. Say! Quickly! How looked he?

SWANHILD [eagerly]. Tall and fair, smooth-faced like a lad, with most kind eyes! They shone like stars! There was a kind of king in his eyes!

BJORN [uplifted]. By Valhalla! yea, a king indeed!

THORKEL. What, is that thy thought of thyself, Bjorn?

BJORN. I think not of myself!

THORKEL. *Like thee*, she said.

BJORN. Ay, but . . .

'Tis strange! Most marvellous strange! The child hath had the *gift* upon her, sure. Here in thy house, thou saidst? A dream? . . . Art thou certain it was—a dream?

SWANHILD. I slept—and he came!

BJORN. Why, then, he may come again, and thou —awake! Harkee, Swanhild! 'Tis secret yet; but . . . Mayhap I will play the wizard for thee, by-and-by; yea, mayhap find thy lover for thee, by-and-by.

SWANHILD. Bjorn! . . .

BJORN. Remember that I told thee.

SWANHILD. What! Find my lover! My lover!

[She turns a rapt little face toward the audience.]

HERDISA [as from a trance]. That same red woman of thine, had she any liking for thy skald-songs?

BJORN. What — Valbrand's? *She?* *She* like them? Forsooth, the poor soul scarce gathered a word of mine all the year I lived with her. We spake two tongues, she and I.

HERDISA. Waste labor then, methinks, singing songs to deaf ears!

BJORN. I found ears for *them.*

HERDISA. Mayhap thou dost rate thy voice too highly! They were songs of love, or such like, if my memory fail not.

BJORN [gravely]. It fails not, Herdisa. Those songs were made for thee.

HERDISA. Ay, but sung by a skald, indeed!

BJORN [glancing toward VALBRAND]. A great one! That minds me. Naming *skalds*, foster-father, *thou* hast been too long silent. I would have a word with *thee.*

THORKEL. Eh! What! With me, Bjorn?

BJORN. Yea; but first, thy cup stands empty there. Thou wert not wont to sit and let the mead-foam flood idly by thee; and [significantly] I am thirsty, too.

THORKEL [abstractedly]. Ay, ay; fill up, boy.

[ODD does so, BJORN remarking meanwhile.]

BJORN. There doth not seem to be the same drinking done in Icefirth as aforetime.

HERDISA. We have changed in many things.

BJORN. So! Now, Thorkel; first, this cup with thee; and then shalt thou speak forth boldly, like a man, and tell how it came about that thou turned SKALD!

HERDISA. Yea, the hour is ripe for that!

[On the word "skald" THORKEL puts down his cup untasted. BJORN does the same.]

BJORN. Why dost thou not drink?

THORKEL. I have no head to drink to-night.

BJORN. What, what, what! Thou, too!

THORKEL. I am not so able as I was. Come, let us gather round the fire yonder. [Rises.]

BJORN. Not till thou hast told thy tale, father! Come! Let the drinking be; but thy tale, at least!

THORKEL [fiercely]. Why wilt thou mock so? The priest hath told thee all, already!

BJORN. Not a word! He told me but plain this — that thou wert skald. He would tell no more.

THORKEL. What! No more than that! Thou hast heard no more than that?

BJORN. Naught. Thou shalt tell me now.

HERDISA. Ay, tell him!

THORKEL. Why do I stand babbling here? How! Tell thee tales! Tales! Why should I tell tales to thee? I am no skald!

BJORN. Why, the priest said that thou . . .

THORKEL. The priest! Ha! . . .

Enow! I join my son yonder.

[He moves round, and toward VALBRAND.]

BJORN. Things be changed in Icefirth, indeed!

THORKEL [turning]. Take them as they be — in silence.

HERDISA. And why, forsooth, may not our warrior be enlightened? Is it not time? Sure, 'tis a brave tale enow *that* he asks for, and touches some of us, full closely.

THORKEL. He is our guest; let that suffice him. If he like it not— H'm!

[He goes to the ingle seat and sits to VALBRAND'S left. The others watch him go. VALBRAND sits doggedly.]

HERDISA. I fear we do not make thee feel thy welcome, Bjorn.

BJORN. Nay, an it come to that, *thou* hast been most kind.

HERDISA. It pleases thee to say so. But come now, my kinsmen be too moody to drink. How if I do taste one cup with thee? What sayest thou? Shall we—pledge loves together?

BJORN. That will I, all my heart, Herdisa!

HERDISA. Why, then, all thy heart, thou shalt. Lo, now [pointing to Thorkel's untasted cup],

Thorkel hath furnished forth a cup for me; and thine own is yet undrained. Wilt thou reach me yon?

[He reaches over the table to do so.]

Hold! Tis a foolish question; but. . . . Whither hath the ring gone from off thine arm—that which once I gave thee? Hast thou lost it?

BJORN. Nay, not lost; but . . . one I love . . .

HERDISA. I understand. So! Thy pledge!

BJORN. Why, then, thus, Herdisa: *Heart's love to thee, and faith till death. So pledge I thee—brother's wife.* [Drinks.] Thine. Why dost thou tarry?

[At the word "death" her eyes have filled with some strange, prescient horror.]

HERDISA. 'Tis but a word I halt for. I know not how to pledge thee.

BJORN. Pledge from thine heart, Herdisa.

HERDISA. Why then: *Whatso lies in mine heart for thee, that do I pledge thee, Bjorn Asmundsson.*

BJORN. That was well said.

HERDISA. Amen.

[A single knock at the door. They listen.]

BJORN. Do outlaw men go free in Icefirth nowadays? Was any horn blown?

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HERDISA. None, to mine ears.

[The knock is repeated.]

VALBRAND. Give bidding, thrall. We be four men here.

ODD [calling]. Come thou in an thou mean peace!

[The door opens and UFEIG enters. He closes the door quietly behind him. BJORN remains seated, but turns slightly toward the new-comer. THORKEL sits gazing round apprehensively; he has recognized the knock. HERDISA and VALBRAND rise, the latter stepping a little down stage and facing toward UFEIG. SWANHILD rises and shrinks down right.]

BJORN. What! The priest with whom I spake two days ago!

UFEIG. Mine eyes be half blinded with the dark out of which I come, and yet I know thy voice. A second greetings to thee—*stranger!*

BJORN [cordially]. The like by thee, with thanks for thy service done me.

UFEIG. 'Twas no service. Well, now . . . [He glances round the room.]

HERDISA. Valbrand, art thou master here, or no?

Or is it thy wont to let thy guests talk pleasantly with thy foes and thou look on? Up, if thou hast blood in thee, and drive yon old gray wolf from thy doors!

BJORN. How! Foes? . . .

UFEIG. Nay, then, perchance he hath not told thee yet. Humph! 'Tis pity! Thou wilt ne'er speak kindly to me, Herdisa, till thou know.

HERDISA. I should like to hear that would make me talk kindly with thee!

UFEIG. Why, thou shalt have thy liking, and welcome. There is peace betwixt thy kinsmen and me.

HERDISA. Thou art a liar to say so!

UFEIG. Ask Thorkel. Thou wilt scarce give the lie to thy good old Thorkel.

VALBRAND [roughly]. The peace hath been handselled and made firm. There is no more to say.

HERDISA. Why, then, I will say no more! Natheless, my thoughts may still work a little within me! But ye brave men will scarce care to hear a woman speak forth her heart full flood, when ye have, all so gently, undone the hate of years! [Suddenly, passionately.] Tell me but one thing. Was this peace with our bitter foe brought about by the warrior of you twain or by—the skald? Ye answer not.

UFEIG. Sure, it was brought about by the *skald.*

VALBRAND [furiously]. Dost thou say by me?

UFEIG. By the skald, I say. Is not that sooth? Or shall I speak more plainly?

[THORKEL has risen. He restrains his son.]

Doth that suffice thee, Herdisa?

HERDISA. The skald—ay!

BJORN. I am not bound, Herdisa. If aught I may do will avail . . .

HERDISA. Peace! I crave not help of thee! [To UFEIG.] Say, what devil hath urged thee hither now?

UFEIG. Unbelief, Herdisa; unbelief like thine, when first our peace was told thee. My seven big sons at home yonder, they doubted, also, when I brake the tidings an hour ago. What proof might I offer them? None! None at all save my bare word, which they. . . . Well, I say no more of that.

My son, Helgi, found grace first . . .

SWANHILD [involuntarily]. Black Helgi! . . .

UFEIG. Yea, thou wilt remember Helgi, Swanhild. . . . He said that if our peace meant aught at all it should be made sound and binding, beyond all doubt; something should be devised, said he, to lock our friendship fast; and he hit upon a rede which pleased us all. Thereupon, am I come hither.

Now, thou wilt scarcely guess mine errand here, Herdisa! . . .

[She remains stubbornly silent.]

BJORN. Some money-gift, an I take right measure of thee.

UFEIG. She craves not help of thee! But thou art wrong. Thorkel, what sayest thou?

THORKEL [gloomily]. Our help, at need, thou hast, by the peace.

UFEIG [pleasantly]. Nay. Try thou, Valbrand!

VALBRAND. I will not guess thy riddles.

UFEIG. Then must I needs call "dog," and bark, too! Harkee! *I come a-wooing hither. . . .*

[There is a vague sensation among them.]

Nay, nay. Tut! Not for myself—I be wellnigh past such foolery—but for Helgi, my son.

[BJORN starts up in anger.]

How? Doth that startle *thee*, also?

BJORN [white hot]. I will but say one word to thee: Whom doth thy son seek to woo in this house?

UFEIG. Doth it touch thee so nearly? Lo! then look beside thee, stranger.

[SWANHILD already clings to BJORN. There is a confused noise of all talking together and as sudden a reac-

tion into silence. THORKEL's voice tails off last.]

THORKEL. Damnation! This hath gone too far!

VALBRAND. By Heaven! There shall be an end of it! Thrall! Reach me my sword! . . .

UFEIG. Hold thy hand! Lest I smite *thee!*

[VALBRAND falls slightly back.]

[Deeply]. Ay, even where it will hurt thee most.

BJORN. What! With that puny arm of thine?

[He points to the other's uplifted left arm.]

UFEIG. Nay, with this other; 'tis withered, but the deadlier of the twain.

BJORN. Ha-ha! A wizard!

UFEIG. Psh! [To VALBRAND.] Well, what is thine answer to my kinsmen?

VALBRAND. Herdisa, one word with thee alone; and afterward . . .

HERDISA. Too many have been spent already. 'Tis but one deed wanted here, and that scarce a man's.

BJORN. I hold with thee, Herdisa!

VALBRAND. Why, then, come what may, this to thee and to thy kinsmen. Take back my flouting and scorn! Ay, and look thou out for warfare, Priest, from this day forth—thou and thy seven great sons.

As for Black Helgi, tell him from me I take his mock, and this world is not big enow to hold us twain henceforward. When thou shalt see his carcass tossing for fish-meat in yonder fiord, thou shalt guess my meaning! Till then let him mock still!

So! The peace is broken! Now do thine uttermost; and hell grip thee!

[After a moment UFEIG says slowly.]

UFEIG. That uttermost will I do, Valbrand, and *now!*

VALBRAND. I will not be by the while!

THORKEL. There is a better way; bide a little. . . .

VALBRAND. Bide thou! I leave my shame with thee!

[He rushes out into the night. UFEIG turns and watches him off.]

UFEIG. Now will I spread light among you.

[THORKEL interposes with a voice of thunder.]

THORKEL. Hold! I have a word to say! Have *I* yet broken peace with thee?

UFEIG. Thy son is one with thee.

THORKEL. Have *I*—yet—broken peace with thee?

UFEIG. The peace was made with both, and he hath broken it.

THORKEL [grimly]. There shall be made amends.

Thrall, go bring thy master back again. Tell him I, his father, bid him.

UFEIG [quietly]. I should say *crave* him, Thorkel.

THORKEL. Say what thou wilt, but bring him.

[As ODD reaches the door.]

Say—all is well. I would have him here, and quickly.

[ODD goes out.]

UFEIG [eying THORKEL]. *Is* all well?

THORKEL. It shall be made so. Thy kinsmen would not take thy word. How if I came yonder to thy hall and made all clear?

UFEIG [eagerly]. Wilt thou go? [His eyes flash triumphantly to his right.] Now?

THORKEL. Now. Get thee forward.

UFEIG [promptly]. I will.

[He goes toward the doorway, THORKEL in the mean time wheeling centre. THORKEL's next remark makes the priest turn inquiringly upon the threshold.]

THORKEL [to SWANHILD]. Child, bring my helm hither, and old War-Flame.

[SWANHILD brings them from the high seat.]

Thy father will be home within the minute. Tell him what hath passed. For thyself, fear not, child.

[She goes into the ingle-place.]

UFEIG. Why War-Flame with thee, Thorkel?

THORKEL. 'Tis my wont to bear my sword in hand when I go about to stablish peace.

[They go, warrior and priest, together.]

BJORN [crossing to SWANHILD]. Tell me, child, how long hath yon priest vexed this house?

SWANHILD. 'Tis of long standing—our quarrel with him. I have heard my grandsire say that it goes back to the old days, when he was priest of Thor, here.

BJORN. What, he! Sure yon was not old Ufeig!

SWANHILD. The same. Didst thou not know?

BJORN. Ufeig! He is much changed!

SWANHILD. Folk say he can change shape at any time.

BJORN. Nay, but to mock my brother so! Ay, and Thorkel, too! Ufeig!

HERDISA. Doth mocking move thee so much, Bjorn?

BJORN [sitting in the ingle]. Gods! Ay.

HERDISA. Leave us, Swanhild; I would speak with our guest alone. Go, seek thy father.

[SWANHILD goes out. HERDISA walks slowly to the side of the ingle-seat before speaking.]

Thou art right; it hath a cruel sting—mocking!

BJORN. Why will they suffer it? An it were my case . . .

HERDISA. Yea, how wouldst thou deal with mockers?

BJORN. There should be but one doom, and that a swift one!

HERDISA. Why dost thou harp so on that word?

BJORN. What word, Herdisa?

HERDISA. Why, *death*. May there not be hate without slaughter?

BJORN. Nay, but for such an one as Ufeig . . .

HERDISA. Leave Ufeig. Let us come to *thee*.

[BJORN looks up inquiringly.]

Let me sit beside thee a little.

BJORN. Do, Herdisa.

[He makes room for her on his right.]

'Tis not the first time we twain have sat together in this ingle. Dost thou remember, Herdisa?

HERDISA. I remember. But in those old days we were for the most part silent; thou wouldst ever go red when I spake to thee, and glance aside; thou

durst not meet mine eyes. Ay, there was little said betwixt us.

BJORN. There was reason for that, Herdisa. My brother . . .

HERDISA. I learned thy reason sure enow—later!

BJORN. Well, those days be dead now.

HERDISA. For thee, ay. Ha-ha! How thou wouldst ever redden in thy face and turn away thine eyes!

BJORN. I was but a boy. Look into them now.

HERDISA [faltering]. Not so; I fear to see the mocker there, Bjorn Asmundsson.

BJORN. Mocker! How so? What mocker?

HERDISA. Why, thou! Thou, mocker! The mocker of women!

BJORN [stung]. Ha! [Gravely.] Thou dost wrong me to the quick, Herdisa. Thou shouldst best know that. For the love of one woman in my life have I ever held all women most dear.

HERDISA [laughing]. For thy red woman, ay! Well, I know not of that. Maybe she had some witchcraft to keep thee true.

BJORN. I owe her much. I would talk to thee of that.

HERDISA. I know not that I care to hear thee.

BJORN. It touches both of us. She hath left a

balm for thee and me, that dead woman; it may heal much pain—yea, bind our lives forevermore.

HERDISA. Why wilt thou still talk of thy woman? I seek no balm of her! Why dost thou shirk the thought unspoken in our hearts? Come thou to the matter that stands like a great fire between thy soul and mine!

Why wilt thou not speak? Or . . . hast thou perchance forgotten?

BJORN. I forget naught of what hath been, yet—it shames to speak of it.

HERDISA. Ha! 'Tis good thy *shame* is known to thee!

BJORN. I know no shame as matters stand now, only shame if I speak—shame to both of us, Herdisa. Why shouldst thou seek to loosen the long silence of years? The past is dead; let it be buried among us now.

HERDISA. Answer me one thing: Why wilt thou not speak of it?

BJORN. Why ask? There is that therein forbids me speak.

HERDISA. 'Tis *that* I would have thee say!

BJORN. How shall I; since . . .

HERDISA. Since . . .?

BJORN. *Since thou art wedded to my foster-brother!*

HERDISA. Ah! *That* is thy taunt! Because I wedded with thy foster-brother! Make thy shame mine! Mine! [Passionately.] Shall I tell thee why I wedded him? Shall I? Shall I?

BJORN. Too much hath been said already! Herdisa . . .

HERDISA. *Hearken!* Thou shalt not stir till thou hast heard the last word. Have I borne this burden all these years, to shirk it at the last, when I have thee here, alive, to listen? I trow not! Hearken:

It was thou whom I loved those days we talk on, Bjorn Asmundsson. I loved thee with all my heart . . .

BJORN. Herdisa . . .

HERDISA. God's blood! I need not hide it! All the dalesfolk knew it, for I was but a young, glad girl, wearing her heart upon her sleeve for all the world to see! Thou wert ever in my thoughts; thou wert my warrior, my king! For thee I lived, I breathed! I watched thee all about, whereso'er thy footsteps led thee; thou wert my day, my sunshine; without thee all was night!

Nay, thou shalt hearken . . .

Thou wert a silent man in those days, naught like thy foster-brother—all songs and fair speech! Deeds were thy life—warrior deeds—and even for that I

loved thee. He sought me ever with his songs and plaints and tears, but I heeded him not; I had naught but mockery for him then. *Thou* wert by, with thy mighty deeds—thou, who hadst never so much as named the name of love within mine ear! . . .

BJORN. But in mine heart . . .

HERDISA. Yea, in thine heart. So deemed I then —in thine heart! And for that I waited—waited, hungering, day by day. Thou wouldst not speak. Methought it was love of thy foster-brother, and pity of his sorrow, that kept thee wordless . . .

BJORN. And so it was . . .

HERDISA. And even for that I hated him the more. So the days wore on, and still the same sweet singing from Valbrand; still the same unbroken dumbness from thee.

BJORN. Herdisa! Thou tearest at mine heart!

HERDISA. What of mine? Dost thou remember that night of the Great Feast, ere thy going away? Dost thou? [Smiting her brow with clinched fist.] It hath been branded here in my brow, night and day, for twenty years!

BJORN. Ay, and in mine!

HERDISA. Lo, there, the mighty chieftains and the thronging of the folk! . . .

BJORN. The flashing of great battle-axes and shields upon the walls! . . .

HERDISA. Swords aloft, like deadly flames of war! . . .

BJORN. Beakers afoam, with gladness of the mead! . . .

HERDISA. There was a cry rang forth from the heart of man to man! . . .

BJORN. And the joyous thunder of great voices lifted loud in praise! . . .

HERDISA. Yea, and above them all, thou, Bjorn Asmundsson, standing foremost, the KING of all those folk! Thou! Thou! Whom I worshipped! And straightway, as I watched thee, there slipped from off me all of maiden shame, and I stood forth, naked love, before thine eyes! What recked I of the folk? What recked I that a maid must needs be spoken for, *not speak herself*, UNASKED! There wert thou, my king: I glorying in thee! And I spake!

BJORN. The music of that speech hath never left mine ears!

HERDISA. Nay, there thou liest! What of thy red woman yonder, overseas?

BJORN. I have loved none other woman in the world, but only thee, in all my life!

HERDISA. Lie upon lie! Why didst thou stand dumb when I spake my love before the folk?

BJORN. I am no skald. My love for thee wrought dumbness.

HERDISA. Yet lies! What love for me that day upon the shores of Vineland, when Thorkel left thee?

BJORN. 'Twas then I loved thee most of all!

HERDISA. Lies! Lies! Lies! They thicken in the air about us! Wilt thou say next that thou wert DUMB FOR LOVE that day?

BJORN. Not so; I bade old Thorkel bear thee one poor word of comfort from me then.

HERDISA. HA! 'TIS OF *that word* I WOULD HAVE THEE SPEAK!

BJORN. How shall I, and thou my brother's wife?

HERDISA. I wed him not till Thorkel spake thy message!

BJORN [dazed]. My message . . .

HERDISA. Thy message! Ha! The echo had scarce died away from Thorkel's lips ere I pledged me to thy foster-brother!

BJORN. How hadst thou heart?

HERDISA. As thou hadst heart to send thy message!

BJORN. Herdisa, art thou mad, or hath my message . . .

[He pauses, with a sudden thought.]

Say what was it. Hast thou remembered?

HERDISA. Ay.

BJORN. Give it shape that I may know it once again.

HERDISA. 'Twas brief; 'twas bitter. I have not forgotten. 'Twas but *one word* came back to me from Vineland.

BJORN. And that? . . .

HERDISA. UNASKED!

[There is a long silence. Then BJORN speaks with an awful slowness.]

BJORN. So: that one word hath broken both our lives.

HERDISA. It hath mended Valbrand's.

BJORN [pursuing his own thought]. 'Twas a little word to do so great a deed!

HERDISA. Valbrand hath holp it, somewhat.

BJORN [with bitter irony]. What, my foster-brother! Nay, then, 'tis *yet* too little, standing thus alone, with none but him to help it! It may not breed, alone, with none but him to help it! Methinks it clamors aloud for YET ONE OTHER WORD TO MATCH IT!

[They have both risen.]

HERDISA. Bjorn Asmundsson!

BJORN [thundering]. Hearken to me!

HERDISA [crossing to right of stage]. I will not hearken to thee! What wilt thou dare to say?

BJORN. To tell thee first the lie within thy heart!

[VALBRAND has entered unperceived.]

What love hath thine been for my foster-brother? Hath he been Bjorn to thee? What is thy child—his *bastard?* 'Twas I to whom thou pledgest thyself! Thy love is mine—mine! Not his! That slave hath shamed thee!

HERDISA [seeing VALBRAND]. Valbrand! Dost thou hear?

BJORN [turning]. Ha! Is it thou?

VALBRAND [hoarsely]. *What hath she been told?*

BJORN [going up above him]. Not all, YET, Valbrand; not—*what is in thy mind!* Ah! Well, I leave that thee to tell, an thou be man enow! I have but *one word* for thee, foster-brother: 'tis my *message* to thy soul, *one word*—UNLOVED!

VALBRAND [gazing at his wife]. Herdisa! . . .

BJORN [hissing the words quickly]. What hast thou been to her this long while, eh? Dost thou deem thyself fit mate for Herdisa? *Thou!* THOU! When she had once known *me!*

By the blood of Baldur, thou hast been but her bedfellow all these years, and she thy wanton—not thy wife! The rest is mine! So! I go north o'er the bridge yonder, to Reekfirth, an thou wouldst hear me further!

[He goes out.]

[VALBRAND'S eyes have never left HERDISA. She stands right, facing the audience.]

HERDISA. Take *his* with thee also. He hath left it. Deal—*justly* with him.

[VALBRAND picks up BJORN'S sword, which she has pointed to on her left.]

VALBRAND. My gift to him. Where is mine?

[HERDISA points without looking. VALBRAND gets the other sword from the ingle-seat and stands waiting.]

HERDISA [to herself]. Ay, there is none other end to hate.

VALBRAND. And which is he on whom thy hate hath lodged?

HERDISA. Go learn his name.

VALBRAND [looking at the swords]. God's blood! I will!

"UNLOVED!"

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[He goes out quickly. She goes slowly to the ingle and sits in the fire-glow there.]

HERDISA. Bjorn shall pay for that bitter word!

[The lights die down slowly, her face being limned with fire-glow to the last. Then there is an utter blackness. The curtain does *not* descend.]

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The Drink of the Raven

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THE THIRD ACT

The scene remains unchanged.

There has been a broken music between Acts II. and III. A prevailing feature of it consists in a regular *tap, tap, tap* of the drum. Toward the end the music hesitates more and more, and finally becomes a drum tapping only, thus: *Tap, tap, tap! Tap, tap! Tap!*

[Upon this HERDISA speaks in the darkness.]

HERDISA. Yea, it hath been a great darkness, all these years; but now 'tis lifted. No more burden! There shall be peace to thee at last, O my soul!

[The lights slowly go up again and reveal her still sitting in the ingle.]

So, Bjorn Asmundsson! 'Tis fully paid between my soul and thine, in the ending! Ay, sure, all will be done by this. Perchance, even now, thy spirit . . . Yea, there is a haunting in the air about me!

And out yonder . . .

Ay, stiff and stark, so they lie, the silent dead!

[She imagines the horror before her.]

That will be a long sleeping for thee, Bjorn! That rest have I brought thee; 'tis a love-gift for thee. Mine.

How found he the might to do it, my . . . thy slayer? Perchance some quick stealth, and then aloft, thus, with his hand, and so . . .

[She gazes upon her own hand, fascinated, and wipes it with the other.]

'Tis like fire!

That I should watch thee, sleeping, thus! *Bed-fellow* was thy word. Well, I have made bed for *thee*, this once! How dost thou like thy bride, dead man? Doth she daze thine eyes? Thine . . . eyes . . .

Ha! How thou wouldst redden at my speech and turn away thine eyes! I said so to thee long ago. . . .

How strange and like twin stars they were! A king's might have looked so! . . .

Oh! Oh!

Why doth Valbrand tarry? 'Tis over now! All ended now! Why comes he not, red-handed from the slaughter, to do his vaunting? A man might well brag of such!

He hath done his deed at last — Valbrand! I

mocked him once for no warrior! He hath plucked out that sting forevermore!

Why doth he not come? Ha! [Apprehensively.]

[The latch of the door is heard. SWANHILD comes in. She looks about, surprised, then steals to the ingle and peeps round playfully.]

Thou, Swanhild! . . .

SWANHILD [mimicking]. Nay, but Goblin Hob! What, not know thine own chick, motherkin goose?

HERDISA. I thought not to see thee, child. [SWANHILD sits at her knee]. I had forgotten thee.

SWANHILD. Ay, thou art a sorry mother to me!

HERDISA. I will be kinder to thee henceforth!

SWANHILD [patting her cheek tenderly]. Ah, thou, thou!

HERDISA. Nay, thy little hand; 'tis . . .

SWANHILD. What of my hand?

HERDISA [gazing curiously]. 'Tis like thy father's!

SWANHILD. They say I feature him.

I could not find him, mother, though, forsooth, I cried him a many times aloud in the night there.

HERDISA. He hath been in again. He followed after—him that came to-night.

SWANHILD. Ay, where is our friend? I was about to ask of him.

HERDISA [lost in her own thought]. Who?

SWANHILD [surprised]. Bjorn.

HERDISA [unguardedly]. He lies . . . [Recovering.] He lies not in our house to-night. He hath left us. Thy father hath holp him a little on the road he goes by.

SWANHILD. I am sorry. Most kind he was to me. How chanced it that he left us?

HERDISA. There was a word came for him, and he went forth.

SWANHILD. At whose summoning?

HERDISA. Why, 'twas of none in this house.

SWANHILD. What! Ufeig's? . . .

HERDISA. Nay, a greater than his, though, sooth, the priest hath much power o'er our house to-night, meseems!

SWANHILD. Pf! I heed *him* no longer. My grandsire hath assured me. Which way went my father and his foster-brother?

HERDISA. Up north, o'er the bridge, to Reekfirth.

SWANHILD. Ay, the way he came. 'Tis an evil night for travelling. *Left*, beyond the bridge there, is but ice and desolation, an thev miss the straight path.

HERDISA [suspiciously]. Didst thou go that way to seek thy father?

SWANHILD. Nay, by the foreshore I. 'Tis all thick mist and darkness beyond the bridge.

HERDISA [her eyes dilating]. Ay.

SWANHILD. How soon ere Bjorn come back again?

HERDISA. *Bjorn* come back! How should *Bjorn* come back? . . . unless thy father, yonder . . .

[The new thought deepens more and more.]

SWANHILD. How strange thou art! Thou saidst erewhile my father did but help him a little on the road.

HERDISA. 'Twas that I *looked* for. He should be back by now. Why doth he not come?

SWANHILD. Mayhap the mist hath stayed him.

HERDISA. Not thy father! What hath the mist to do to stay thy *father?*

SWANHILD. Pray God it stay them both, and bring Bjorn back again—and soon!

HERDISA. Peace, child! If thou wouldst pray, pray for thy father, that *he* come.

SWANHILD. Yea, and for Bjorn, too!

HERDISA. For thy father, I say! Ha! Who was that?

[They have both risen. SWANHILD goes over to the guest seat and faces

door. THORKEL enters, sword in hand.]

SWANHILD. 'Tis my grandsire come back from Ufeig's.

[THORKEL advances grimly to the middle.]

HERDISA. Well? . . .

THORKEL [to SWANHILD]. Thou art free from Helgi, child, henceforward. He hath made peace with me.

HERDISA. More peace! How?

THORKEL. He mocked too far. I slew him.

[SWANHILD shudders, and crosses herself involuntarily. THORKEL watches her gravely for a moment, then hands her his sword, etc.]

Lay it by, Swanhild. It needs rest.

[SWANHILD puts it back, by the high seat.]

Where is Valbrand?

SWANHILD. He hath seen Bjorn on his road. Bjorn hath left us.

THORKEL. Is that so, Herdisa?

HERDISA. 'Twas so purposed.

SWANHILD. How if Helgi's brethren meet my father on his way home! . . .

THORKEL. They will vex not. To-night they walk in hell with Helgi.

SWANHILD. And Ufeig! . . . What of Ufeig?

THORKEL. I have no longer power o'er him. He lives. Howbeit, he hath no son from this hour forth.

[An agonized cry is heard far off. They all listen intently.]

What was yon?

HERDISA. 'Twas naught! I heard no cry!

SWANHILD. Sure; 'twas the sound of some soul in pain!

HERDISA. Get thee to bed, child, quickly! Nay! Go!

[SWANHILD goes up the steps, right. At the top she speaks.]

SWANHILD. Good-night, motherkin.

HERDISA [absently]. Good-night.

[The cry is repeated nearer the house. SWANHILD turns round a scared face. Her mother makes a gesture for her to go. She does so.]

THORKEL. 'Tis the second time. What doth it mean?

HERDISA. I cannot say—for sure.

[The cry again; quite near now.]

THORKEL. 'Tis near the house; it comes hither. I will go see.

HERDISA. Stay! Thou shalt know soon enough!

[THORKEL, up right; HERDISA, left by fire. Some one stumbles heavily against the outer door, moaning piteously. A moment later ODD enters, bearing Bjorn's sword. Staggering to middle of stage, he casts down the sword between them. HERDISA follows the action with a look of horror.]

ODD. Herdisa! Mistress! Oh!

[A sickly pause. HERDISA points to sword.]

HERDISA. Tell thou thy tale!

ODD [gasping]. Up on the bridge yonder, o'er the river . . . 'Tis swollen in the gully down below . . . My master and the guest that came to-night! . . . Oh! . . .

THORKEL. Ay, what of them?

ODD. It will move thee nigh to death, mistress! Woe is me!

HERDISA. In God's name, tell all plainly!

ODD. I found him not—my master—when first I sped me forth to do old Thorkel's bidding, though

sooth, I hunted up and down the dale hallooing loudly. I gat no answer, save the angry growling of the sea, the thunder of old Kaldalon to the north there, and the distant sound of mighty Glamu, clashing and clamoring beyond the southern hills.

Hither and thither, stumbling, at last I won unto the uplands; and ere I was well ware of it—for the mist 'gan thicken about me—I was now come nigh upon the bridge. It swayed and creaked upon the hempen bands.

Scarce was I there when one rushed by me, raving as one distraught. I hailed him, but he answered not, yet, sooth, his weapon grazed me in the side here as he passed. And now was he come, maddening, upon the bridge. Then a thought smote clear upon me that there was none other than my master, and Valbrand sure it was.

But by now was I mindful of another with him. He was ahead; he was already upon the bridge. Whiles I stood wondering who that other might be, for I could see naught plainly, my master hailed him by his name. He called him Bjorn. It was the guest that sojourned here to-night.

Then . . . then . . .

THORKEL. Say on! Say on!

ODD. Ere I might move they were at each other's

throats! I heard no cause of quarrel—no word was spoke between them; only, I heard the bitter shriek of blade on blade, as there they dealt with death, amid the bickering mist!

THORKEL. How! Were both slain?

ODD. Nay . . . One remained.

HERDISA. And he? . . .

ODD. Whiles I stood gasping for fear, that one lifted high the corpse of him that he had slain and, with a cry, cast him into the torrent that foams beneath the bridge. One moment I caught the shadow of his falling, against the white froth of the flood, and next he hurtled swiftly for the fiord.

HERDISA. And he that remained? . . .

ODD. Then, first, he noted where I stood, and hailed my name. His voice . . .

HERDISA [quickly]. Ay, what of his voice?

ODD. Never heard I sound like that before. 'Twas like a beast in pain.

HERDISA. What said he?

ODD. He cast me his sword, and with it a word for thee: *Go tell thy mistress he whom she hates is dead.*

HERDISA. Whom I hate!

ODD. Ay. So saying, he fled like one bewitched; and ever as he fled I heard him crying out: *My brother! I have slain him! Accursed! Accursed!*

"BJORN OR VALBRAND, WHICH?"

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HERDISA. And which was he — the murderer? Answer, quickly! Bjorn or Valbrand, which?

ODD [in an agony]. I could not see; the darkness pressed upon me! Believe me, I could not see; and yet . . . and yet . . .

HERDISA. And yet? . . .

ODD. Lo, his sword there lies before thee!

[HERDISA turns away her face, shuddering.]

THORKEL. Bring hither.

[ODD brings the sword to THORKEL.]

The haft unbound. 'Tis a warrior's.

[He hands the sword back to ODD, who gazes upon it, fascinated. After a pause HERDISA speaks with dreadful quietness.]

HERDISA. Then I have lost my mate. The father of my child is dead. [Placing the back of her hand to her eyes, she stands so for a few seconds.]

THORKEL. And my son.

[ODD, whimpering like a stricken beast, crosses to the hearth and lies face downward there. He takes the sword with him, and afterward leaves it there.]

This is justice. The deed was mine.

HERDISA [tonelessly]. Not so. *I* killed him.

[ODD whimpers.]

[In an awful whisper.] How shall I answer for him?

THORKEL. Herdisa, stand not so. Let forth the bitter word of thy sorrow, weeping. It will ease thee a little.

HERDISA. What word is left me? Our house hath lost its tongue. Valbrand the skald is dead!

[ODD whimpers.]

Ay, a great skald men called him! That was long ago—ere he married me! He sang no more from that day forth. I killed him *then*. How shall I answer for him?

A great skald! I have heard men say that it was his word, when it mounted high upon the wings of song, that maddened them on to whatsoever deeds they did! The maidens lilt his love-runes to this very hour. For me he made them. I shall hear them till the day I die.

[With a sudden gust of passionate repentance.] Ah! What be all ye mighty warriors beside such an one as he? And what should I be—I, his wife—that helped him nothing in his song? Fierce-hearted, a viking's daughter, I learned my lesson from such men as thou, old Thorkel. I would have made

him a thing of blood, like thee; and lo, the music of his life is fled forever! How shall I make answer? How shall I make amends?

[She continues with feverish agony.] A great skald men said! A great skald! That shall be said again of him, in Iceland! He shall have a great skald's burial! Yea, songs shall be cast up high above the piling of his barrow, and the minstrels shall make music about his bones! Ye men of blood count yourselves loftier than common folk; and when ye meet your bane, the death-song for you foams and surges like a huge sea-storm; but what cry in Iceland shall compare with that which shall arise and echo down the days for Valbrand the skald, the mighty skald, whom I have murdered!

[A low whimper from ODD.]

Thou hast no answer. Hast thou naught to say?

THORKEL. Naught. I am dumb.

HERDISA. Ay, thou art right. No help in words. 'Tis the woman's heart, to *speak* her grief!

THORKEL. I do as I may do. I know no other way.

HERDISA. Truth; thy way is best. The hour calls for it!

THORKEL. How? What way is that?

HERDISA. Why, the warrior's. [To ODD.] Say! Which way fled he?

ODD. Up over the bridge, to northward.

HERDISA. Turned he right or left?

ODD. Left, over the bridge, toward Dranga and the hills of ice.

HERDISA. What! 'Tis desolation that way, and vast walls of pathless rock!

THORKEL. How shall that profit thee aught?

HERDISA. *How?* And thou a warrior! Lo, now, yonder thy deed awaits thee!

THORKEL. What deed, Herdisa?

HERDISA. Why, the avenging for my husband's blood!

THORKEL. What, avenging! Dost thou say avenging? Against Bjorn?

HERDISA. What other man but him!

THORKEL. *I!*

HERDISA. Who else but thee!

THORKEL. I will lift no further hand against him!

HERDISA. Not though he hath slain thine own son!

THORKEL. I take that blood upon myself! Bjorn shall not die by me!

HERDISA. Thou wilt not?

THORKEL. There is that, unknown to thee, forbids me slay him!

HERDISA. How! Is it fear?

THORKEL. Ay, if thou wilt, call it fear.

HERDISA. And thou art he who but this very night hath slaughtered all the sons of Ufeig! Seven lusty men against thee, and thou didst prevail o'er all! Nay, then, though thou slay me, I will speak! Niddering!

THORKEL. Hold thy peace!

HERDISA. Niddering, I say!

THORKEL. Herdisa! [For a moment he regards her with anger; then, conquering himself, he continues quietly.] Come what may, thou hast mine answer: I will not venture forth to-night for Dranga and the hills of ice. [He walks down right.] Ay, come what may.

HERDISA [slowly]. Then must I seek some other aid.

[A single knock at the door. UFEIG enters. He stands in the middle. From this point in the play there is another element added to his character—a suppressed fire, hell smouldering in him.]

[They are about to speak, but the priest interrupts them.]

UFEIG. Yea, doth it start you to look on me again? Lo, I come fresh from the havoc of my

sons, and I know my danger! But I bring you news!

THORKEL. We know thy news. Thou wouldst tell of the slaying up on the bridge yonder.

UFEIG. What, reached thee already! It hath sped fast. I deemed none so swift as I.

HERDISA. And now thou art come to vaunt it over us.

UFEIG. Doth it touch thee so closely that I may *vaunt* it over thee?

HERDISA. It had need; but I am iron against thee.

UFEIG. Thou wilt not be iron when thou hast heard more.

THORKEL. Priest! I will not have thee . . .

UFEIG [flashing dangerously upon him]. Nay, I am free of thee!

HERDISA. Let him void all! What I have lost, I have lost!

UFEIG. Was, then, that dead man so dear to thee, Herdisa?

HERDISA. Ay—seven sons to me, in one!

UFEIG [another flash at THORKEL]. Yea, so much! Well, thou wilt ne'er hear his great voice again!

[THORKEL'S attention is vaguely stirred.]

HERDISA. Ay, it made more music than thy seven oxen yonder!

UFEIG. What! *Sing* to thee, did he? *He!* Well, I know not of that! Mayhap he made song enow for thee, by stealth, long days ago, when his brother was not by. Men heard him not!

HERDISA. He did all openly! His life was clear!

UFEIG. Then was thine a lie! Thou wouldst ever cry the warrior in him, not the skald!

HERDISA. Ay, mock me with that!

UFEIG. Then what wilt thou say when thou shalt learn of one more lie, which even now thou shalt . . .

THORKEL } together. { Priest! . . .
HERDISA } { I will not hear thee longer!
'Tis past bearing! Odd! Odd! To the foreshore yonder! Come!

UFEIG. Nay, ere thou find his corpse, hear me . . .

[THORKEL holds him back with iron hand.]

HERDISA [going through the door]. Odd! Odd!

THORKEL [sternly]. Follow thy mistress! Quickly!

[ODD runs after HERDISA. When the door closes THORKEL loosens his grasp with a fling, which sends the priest spinning over to the fire-

side. THORKEL takes a step or two up stage, and turns, facing him.]

UFEIG [swiftly, venomously]. Our peace is broken! Thou canst not stay me now!

THORKEL [passionately]. 'Twas for their own mocking I slew thy sons!

UFEIG. They cry for vengeance still!

THORKEL. Are they not avenged enow already?

UFEIG. How so, with all thy house in peace here, and thy lie untold?

THORKEL. Thou hast had blood for blood!

UFEIG. How blood for blood?

THORKEL. I deem my one son Valbrand is sufficient recompense for all thy seven!

UFEIG. How should there be recompense in *Valbrand?*

THORKEL. Why didst thou come here vaunting? Hath not Bjorn slain him?

UFEIG. *Valbrand* slain! . . .

Ay, ay, ay! Ay, ay!

[THORKEL follows his curious change of manner with a dawning realization of what it may mean. After a moment he speaks suddenly.]

THORKEL. What is in thy mind? Didst thou see the fight yonder?

UFEIG. Every stroke.

THORKEL. What didst thou see?

UFEIG. All.

[There is a moment of expectation. Then he breaks out into a high-pitched, mirthless shriek of laughter.]

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! My seven big sons be avenged! [He makes for the door.]

THORKEL. Hold! Where wilt thou go?

UFEIG. *Not* after Herdisa! Ha, ha, ha! I do no more, henceforward! I leave all to Fate!

THORKEL. What dost thou mean?

UFEIG [flashing round at him]. Harkee! Herdisa yonder goes forth to find her corpse! Repentance works in strange ways. She bewails the loss of—*Valbrand!*

THORKEL. And so she doth, most bitterly!

UFEIG. Yea—*Valbrand being dead!* HOW IF IT HAD BEEN OTHERWISE?

THORKEL. [His face betokens his thought.]

UFEIG [at the door]. Lo, now, thou hast slain my seed, and I am already old! Yet have I gendered me of somewhat among thy kin that shall live! I shall not die childless!

[He goes out, still with the same mirthless laughter in his throat.

THORKEL ponders for a moment. Then he goes to the door, right, and opens it.]

THORKEL. Swanhild! Swanhild! Hither, quickly.

SWANHILD [distantly]. Is it thou, grandfather?

THORKEL. Ay; come! [He crosses toward fireplace.]

[SWANHILD enters. Her hair is unplaited. She has on her light underdress only.]

SWANHILD [crossing to him]. I should have been asleep, but I sat dreaming yonder. What wouldst thou?

THORKEL. Tell me, child, when Bjorn went forth to-night, bore he *his own* sword with him, or no?

SWANHILD. I was not here to see.

THORKEL. Did I not bid thee stay until thy father . . .

SWANHILD. My mother bade me follow Odd, and find him.

THORKEL. Did she so? Then, mayhap, she hath not told thee . . . Thou dost not know . . .

SWANHILD [pointing across him]. See, grandfather, there is Bjorn's sword yonder—on the ground there. The haft hath no binding.

THORKEL. Ay, 'tis Bjorn's *sword*, right enow.
Fetch me my helm, Swanhild—nay, my hat.

[She runs to the high seat to do so.]

Ay, Bjorn's *sword;* but . . .

SWANHILD. And thy weapon, grandfather?

THORKEL. Nay, 'tis a gentler errand this time—one of peace, indeed! 'Tis to bring back . . .
Ay, all may yet be well if . . .

[The sword fascinates him still. SWANHILD gives him his hat.]

SWANHILD. Whither shall I tell my mother thou hast gone, an she ask me?

THORKEL. Say I go *north, left by the bridge, for Dranga and the hills of ice.*

SWANHILD. Grandfather! Not to-night!

THORKEL. Do my bidding! Stay till she come.

[He goes out. SWANHILD stands lost in thought for a moment; then she walks slowly to the ingle-seat and sits down.]

SWANHILD. 'Tis some secret in the air. They seek to keep it from me. First, father; then, mother; and now, my grandsire! A secret, and from me.
Yea, and Bjorn, too! *He* named a secret! We spake about my dream, and . . .
Mayhap I will play the wizard for thee by-and-

by; yea, find thy lover for thee by-and-by! Those were his words—Bjorn's words. Jesu, recompense him!

If it should be so!

[A horn sounds outside. She rises, half in fear, half in joy.]

Heaven, but it hath a sweet sound!

[After a short silence the latch of the door is lifted and OLAF enters. He is clean-shaven, and clad in byrnie and shining viking helm with eagle feathers. He pauses on the threshold. SWANHILD stands alert, not daring to look.

OLAF. Any one in this house, here?

SWANHILD [breathlessly]. Yea!

OLAF. Is there harborage here for a wayfaring guest to-night?

SWANHILD. How comest thou? As a friend?

OLAF. There is naught but peace in my heart. [He comes a step farther down.] What wilt thou? I am nigh death for lack of . . .

[He sees her. SWANHILD has turned toward him. They both stand dazed with wonder.]

SWANHILD [simply]. Welcome. I looked for thee.

OLAF. And I for thee. Where have we twain met before?

SWANHILD. 'Twas in a dream.

[They stand rapt, looking at each other.]

[FIRST PICTURE. As above.

[SECOND PICTURE. She is leading him to the table.

[THIRD PICTURE. They are seated at the supper-table, as at the beginning of the fourth act.]

END OF THE THIRD ACT

THE FOURTH ACT

The Draining of the Lees

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THE FOURTH ACT

The scene remains unchanged.

SWANHILD and OLAF are at the table. He sits in the guest seat, facing the audience; she sits opposite, in VALBRAND'S seat. They are in animated conversation. OLAF has just finished his supper.

OLAF. Ay, ay, thy dream! And that was marvellous strange!

SWANHILD. More marvel still to find thy very self!

OLAF. And most of all for me to light on thee! Lo, now, this wonder! Here have we spoken but a little while together, and yet mine heart hath dreamed upon thee always!

SWANHILD. And mine on thee, meseems! To-night made clear what lingered there before.

OLAF. 'Tis so with me! There was a haunting of thee ere ever I saw thy face. There hath been somewhat sweet of thee within me all my days. I never knew till now!

SWANHILD. 'Tis Heaven whispering, to hear thee say so!

OLAF. I have known thee other worlds than this.

SWANHILD. Two pixies, we have played at hide-and-find among the shadows!

OLAF. And I have lost thee ever, but to find again, as now.

SWANHILD. Meseems I have danced goblin with thee down the ways of dreamland; hither and thither we have tripped together in the moonbeams, thou and I, to the music of waves washing!

OLAF. In dreamland, sayst thou? Lo, now, that is passed; and here we be alive together, thou and I!

SWANHILD. What wouldst thou do for me? I would be a little house-thrall for thee, and joy therein.

OLAF. I would be thy warrior, I!

SWANHILD. Yea, and what do?

OLAF. Somewhat with life in't! Some great deed! Some mighty stroke that . . .

Or shall it be death? Ay, that way, too, would show . . .

SWANHILD. Nay, not so far for me . . .

OLAF. Methinks there were no sweeter death in all the world than die for thee.

SWANHILD. It fears me; yet I love to hear thee say so!

Oh, I love thee, I love thee! . . .

How dost thou deem of me? Wilt be my lover?

OLAF. I will be more, an Fate so will!

SWANHILD. How may that be? Love is all there may be! There never may be more!

OLAF. Nay, but to have thee for my very mate! . . .

[SWANHILD starts to her feet.]

SWANHILD. Dost thou mean . . . What! Thy wife?

OLAF. Ah, little maid! I have wronged thee with my rough speech!

SWANHILD. Mayhap thou deemst me older than I am; I look old for my years . . .

OLAF. Forgive me, forgive me.

SWANHILD. I never blamed thee.

OLAF. Look into mine eyes! Little maid! Let me know myself forgiven! Look! Look! . . .

Ah! Thy soul again!

[She leans over the table toward him.]

SWANHILD. I can see myself in thine eyes. What canst thou see in mine?

OLAF. I see sweet lilies growing in a mead apart!

SWANHILD. What be they? Lilies . . .

OLAF. Flowers like thee.

SWANHILD. I know none such in Icefirth. They grow not hereabout.

OLAF. There hath no need. I have plucked them idly, many a time, in the land I come from. I should have worshipped them more tenderly.

SWANHILD. 'Tis a fair land hath grown thee. Tell me thereof.

OLAF. 'Tis far off, over the sea. Much have I loved my land, and counted it the only land for me. Now have I found another!

SWANHILD. Yea—Iceland!

OLAF. Iceland hath shown it me.

SWANHILD. Tell me one thing. What is thy name?

OLAF. Have I not told thee? My name is Olaf.

SWANHILD [echoing]. Olaf! Olaf! It sounds upon the lips like a sigh. Olaf! Wouldst thou like to know my name? They call me Swanhild.

OLAF. 'Tis like the lapping of soft waves upon a strand of gold!

SWANHILD. Tell me, dost thou sing songs? Art thou a skald?

OLAF. What! A *skald!* Nay, I am a warrior . . . Why! Hast thou any liking for skalds?

SWANHILD. They have ever seemed most wonderful to me!

OLAF [suddenly converted]. Mayhap I *be* a little bent that way.

SWANHILD. Henceforward I shall love the warrior best! Sure; 'tis a kind of skald!

OLAF. I will be both for thee! Harkee! I know two rimes!

SWANHILD. Dost thou? Dost thou?

OLAF. Ay. One is for warts upon the hand, and t'other for the evil eye! I learned them when I was a boy.

SWANHILD. Nay, but out of thine own heart, Olaf! Canst thou not sing songs out of thine own heart?

OLAF. I can try!

SWANHILD. Do! Do!

OLAF. How might it be an I sang a song of war—something stirring and manful, with great battles in't?

SWANHILD. Yea, and of dwarfs and of giants, and great drakes, fiery-eyed, that come out upon thee, silent, in the darkness! Ugh!

OLAF. Ooh!

Canst thou sing songs out of thine own heart?

SWANHILD. I can a little; but I wait thine, Olaf.

OLAF. Oh! I will anon. 'Tis rusty with me now.

SWANHILD. Dost thou know what I do think?

OLAF. Nay; what?

SWANHILD. I think thou couldst not an thou tried!

OLAF. What! Not sing songs? Could not?

SWANHILD [solemnly]. Could not!

OLAF. I can do more than sing! I can fight!

SWANHILD [teasing]. Yea, but not sing songs!

OLAF. I can kill a man—*two* men—*three!*

SWANHILD [seriously]. Oh! Hast thou ever?

OLAF. Nay; but I will!

As for that other, thou shouldst hear my father! He hath the voice for singing, I promise thee!

SWANHILD. What! Is he a skald?

OLAF. Not so; a warrior he—a mighty one! Yet he hath sung me many songs, one time and another, out in Vineland yonder.

SWANHILD. In Vineland! What — thy father! Tell me, is he yet living?

OLAF. I deem so; *and* like to be this many a long year—a hearty man, my father! He parted from me but this very night, out in the mist there.

SWANHILD. That was strange! To-night! Most strange! What parted you?

OLAF. Why, now thou mindest me, 'twas a sword brought that about. Mine hanger-buckle came undone, and ere I was well ware, down fell sword and all a-clattering among the lava-crags. Whiles I

lagged behind, to look for it, there rose a blast of storm and hid my father from me. Long time I cried his name, but gat no answer, until the gale had spent itself beyond the distant hills; then at last, far off, deep down below me in the gully, I heard his voice: *I have lost thee, boy. Where art thou? Hast thou found thy sword?* I told him that I sought it still. *Why, then,* cried he, *I will press forward. Perchance 'twere better I went before thee. Follow thou on when thou hast found the weapon. There is but one path, and that a sure one. Thou canst not miss it. Get thee forward, father,* I shouted; *we shall meet some time ere the night be out, I guess, or I am not thy son. 'Tis not the first time that I found my way alone!*

Scarce had the laughter of his voice replying, faded away, when a mist came down and covered up my path! I have wandered without my sword, without my father, ever since!

SWANHILD. That was ill-luck for thee to lose thy sword!

OLAF. Nay, I reck not of that; 'twas a boy's weapon at best. I always told my father so.

SWANHILD. How if thy father had found way hither in place of thee?

OLAF. What! And sat in the guest seat set for me!

SWANHILD. Ay, and eaten up thy griddle-cakes!

OLAF. And won first gaze on thee!

SWANHILD. H'm! And had spoke of love, may-hap, before I ever saw thee!

OLAF [laughing]. Nay, I take thy trick! Thou canst not egg me on against my father! We be like two brothers together, he and I . . .

Yea, he must find me another sword in place of that I lost! A man's—like his!

SWANHILD. Tell me; is he featured at all like thee?

OLAF. Folk say so; but older, and with a beard.

Ay, it had been strange an I had found him here before me!

SWANHILD. That might well have been; and, indeed . . .

OLAF. In sooth, nay. The house he was bound for lies a ten leagues farther on from here.

SWANHILD. Oh! What house is that?

OLAF. Why, the house of one called Valbrand.

SWANHILD. What! Valbrand Thorkelsson?

OLAF. The very same. He is my father's foster-brother. They were his songs my father sang to me in Vineland. Dost thou know the man?

[SWANHILD smothers a little laugh.]

Say, dost thou?

SWANHILD. 'M! 'M! And Herdisa, his wife.

OLAF. Ay, he named Herdisa once.

SWANHILD [after a moment]. Spake he of any others in that house?

OLAF. There was old Thorkel and . . . Ay, and . . .

SWANHILD. Why dost thou redden so, and glance aside?

OLAF [confused]. Nay, I knew not that I reddened.

SWANHILD [teasing]. Nay, nay, nay! . . .

OLAF. Why, 'twas but for some folly that my father spake to me. He—he spake of a daughter . . .

SWANHILD. I see no such folly in that!

OLAF. 'Twas what my father said that made the folly.

SWANHILD. What did he say? Tell me, tell me?

OLAF. He—he deemed perchance that she and I —that she and I—might make a match of it!

[They both laugh uncontrollably.]

SWANHILD. Nay, but why do I laugh? Mayhap, when thou shalt know her, she will please thee better than I!

OLAF. Thou hast made me hate her by saying so!

SWANHILD. Thou wilt love her then—at least as well as now thou lovest me!

OLAF [emphatically]. That will I never do!

SWANHILD. She is full as fair to look upon as I, yet, in good sooth, I myself count little of her!

OLAF. I am one with thee in that!

SWANHILD [in his tone]. That wilt thou never be!

OLAF. Nay; but Swanhild—Swanhild . . .

SWANHILD [suddenly]. Say! Did thy father *name* her to thee?

OLAF. Nay, he knew not himself. He had but heard of her from another. What is she called?

SWANHILD. Lo, now, how thou lingerest yet upon her in thy thoughts!

OLAF. Well, well, forget her! She is naught to me—will never be aught! Look thou! Here is the ring my father bade me give her, an I won her love. It never left his arm for all the years I knew him till two days ago. 'Tis dear to me for that. How if I troth thee with it now? Wilt thou then believe me?

[They stand facing each other across the table.]

SWANHILD [gravely]. And if I take it . . .

OLAF. Thereby shalt thou learn my true love for thyself, and how, moreover, Valbrand's maid shall ne'er be aught to me.

[SWANHILD puts the ring on her arm.]

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SWANHILD. Then—for thy love's sake only.

[She stands rapt for a moment.]

Lord! How we prattle! Who knows what great things be in store for us! I know of one for thee, anyway!

OLAF. What may that be?

SWANHILD. Why, when thou knowest Valbrand's daughter!

OLAF. Death take her! I would she were a thousand leagues away, not ten!

SWANHILD. That minds me. Who told thee of Valbrand's house—that it was so far away?

OLAF. It was a kind old man I met out yonder, just ere I blew my horn. He bade me hither for the night instead.

SWANHILD. I bless him for that! How looked he?

OLAF. I could not see his face; a hood half hid him. He had on a gown with beads upon it.

SWANHILD [startled]. How! That would be the priest!

OLAF. Ay, very like. But come, the meal is over. Show me the spot where first I came upon thee in thy dream. In thy bower, thou saidst. Is it yon?

[He turns, facing the bower.]

SWANHILD [joining him, she rests her hand upon his shoulder; their backs are to the audience]. Yea,

wouldst thou like to see it? 'Tis in there I am mostly wont to spend my days when the spring is come.

OLAF. I would fain see the place that brought us twain such joy.

SWANHILD. Why, then, thou shalt. See!

[She goes to right of the bower and draws one curtain aside.]

I shall always look upon my bower with different eyes, after this night. See! 'Tis dark; but go thou in. I will follow.

[OLAF makes to enter, but suddenly reels back, his hand to his brow.]

OLAF. Ah! 'Tis magic! I saw . . .

SWANHILD. Friend! Olaf! Olaf! What didst thou see? . . .

OLAF. Why, methought mine own shape lying there . . .

SWANHILD. Olaf! Thou art sick . . .

OLAF. Ay, that will be it . . . Stunned a little . . . Ah! 'Twas like death for the moment. . . . I will rest me a little, and then . . .

SWANHILD. Ay, do. [She helps him across to the ingle.] 'Tis the long wandering without food and rest hath wearied thee. So, lie thou there.

[He lies down on the ingle-seat, at full length, his head toward her, right.]

Ah! Thy color comes again! So! But thou didst affright me! Art more comforted?

OLAF. Ay, fret not. There is rest here, with thee, and in thy house.

SWANHILD. Sleep a little. It will ease thee.

OLAF. What—now?

SWANHILD. Yea, thou art weary. I will watch over till thou wake.

OLAF. Why, 'tis fretful of me; but so I will.

[He rests his face upon his arm, but it is still to be seen.]

SWANHILD. Shall I sing thee to thy sleep?

OLAF. Yea, Swanhild, do. [The voice falters with sleep already.]

SWANHILD. Wait thou one . . .

[She brings over her seat and the harp. She sits just below ingle, to right of it.]

OLAF. Let it be one of thine—own—little songs. Out of—thine—own—heart.

SWANHILD [song].

The brunt of the day, and the burden,
Have wandered away in the west;
Then cast off the coil
Of thy troublesome toil,
And thy guerdon
Be rest.

OLAF [drowsily]. And so it is—rest.
SWANHILD [song].

The shadow of death is a slumber . . .

OLAF. Nay—sing—Swanhild . . .
SWANHILD [song].

The shadow of death is a slumber
That waiteth the morn of the blest;
Then cast off the strife,
And the ills of thy life,
That encumber
Thy rest.

[OLAF's face drops down over his arm, *and is hidden.*]

Olaf! Olaf! [A pause.] Asleep!

[HERDISA comes in.]

HERDISA. The waves hold Winterfeast to-night. They yield up naught. They glut them still with the corpses of dead men.

SWANHILD. Ssh! Ssh! Not a word, mother!

[She joins her up stage, above the ingle.]

HERDISA. Well, it will wait. By-and-by for that!

SWANHILD. What ails thee, mother? Why dost thou look about?

HERDISA. 'Tis a man I look for—a man in all this world!

SWANHILD. Ssh! Not so loud! He will hear thee!

HERDISA. He! Who? Who?

SWANHILD. My warrior!

HERDISA. A warrior! What dost thou mean, child?

SWANHILD. Ssh! He is yonder, asleep.

HERDISA. What! *Bjorn!* . . .

SWANHILD. Nay, not Bjorn himself, but . . . Nay, I can keep secrets, too. He is marvellous like him!

HERDISA. How! Mighty and terrible, with warfare in his throat?

SWANHILD. I doubt it not, an matters lay that way.

HERDISA. Ha! He hath come from God!

SWANHILD. So deemed I.

HERDISA. A warrior, sayst thou. How might we bind him to us, fast?

SWANHILD. He would taste the bitter death for me, he said.

HERDISA. A good word. Asleep, thou sayst?

SWANHILD. Ay.

HERDISA. I will go look on him. [Pauses.] Yet sooth, it fears me.

SWANHILD. How so?

HERDISA. Lest he be not man enow.

SWANHILD. Look for thyself.

HERDISA [after a moment's hesitation]. I will. [She goes forward and looks at OLAF.] His face is hidden.

SWANHILD. 'Tis like God's sunlight!

HERDISA. What! Soft-shining, like—like a girl's?

SWANHILD. Bright-eager, as at mid-day.

HERDISA. I will move him. [Makes as to do so.]

SWANHILD. Nay, wake him not. Let him rest awhile. He hath wandered all day shelterless and without food. He hath need of rest. It will refresh him.

HERDISA. Mayhap thou art right. He will need strength.

SWANHILD. He nigh-on fainted awhile since.

HERDISA. How! A weakling! . . .

SWANHILD. Nay, but weary with the day's wearing.

HERDISA. He is limbed lithely. His hand hath a grip in it by seeming. How long hath he lain thus?

SWANHILD. But a little. I sang him to his sleep.

HERDISA. Against my coming. Ay, thou didst well.

SWANHILD. Sleep will better him. Thou shalt see him mighty when he wakes.

HERDISA. So *would* I — strong, with fire in his eyes, and the echo of great thunders in his voice!

SWANHILD. Thou hast ever loved the warrior, mother!

HERDISA. Peace, my child! Thy father was a skald!

SWANHILD. Until thou madest him warrior. I know thy reasons now, mother . . .

HERDISA. How! My reasons . . .

SWANHILD. 'Tis blithe in woman's heart to look on such a man!

HERDISA. It waxes late. I shall have a tale to tell thee on the morrow.

SWANHILD. I shall have one for thee.

HERDISA. Till then I would have thy peace unbroken. Come, get thee to bed, child. I will sit and watch.

SWANHILD. Wilt thou not let me sit with thee a bit?

HERDISA. Nay, press me not; 'tis late. Come, little ewe-lamb!

SWANHILD. Since needs be.

[They embrace each other and kiss.]

HERDISA. Be my little maid, and sleep.

SWANHILD. To-night hath been the happiest Winterfeast of all my life! Good-night, motherkin.

HERDISA. Good-night.

SWANHILD [half-way across stage]. Oh! My grandsire bade me give a message to thee . . .

HERDISA. It will wait. I look for naught from thy grandsire. Good-night, my child.

[SWANHILD slowly mounts the steps. At the top she pauses for a last word.]

SWANHILD. Give him a long rest, mother!

HERDISA. I will. I will.

[SWANHILD goes out. HERDISA remains standing a minute, lost in deep thought. Then she goes to sit down on SWANHILD'S stool, but her attention being arrested by the sword, which lies to left of her, she picks it up. She sits.]

Ay, with his own sword! 'Tis meet! 'Tis meet! 'Tis meet!

[She lays it across her knees, the handle toward the sleeping man.]

Still asleep. Yea, he should be a warrior by the shape of him. And yet I fear when I shall see his face, lest I find the niddering there. Ay, and for more cause, yet . . .

How the moments creep—slow—slow—like a thief!

Still sound. Well, 'tis strength in him, I need. That other hath strength enow . . . How like a great mast he towered above the warriors, here in this hall, that day I . . .

[Checking herself, she looks at the sword-edge curiously.] Valbrand's! Let me not forget it! 'Tis my husband's blood!

OLAF [drowsily]. Swanhild!

HERDISA [stiffening, looking before her]. Ha!

OLAF [half waking]. Thy little song again! [He lifts up his head.] What, Swanhild . . . Eh! Who art thou? [He sits up.]

[Throughout the following scene HERDISA sits immovable, gazing before her, not daring to look at him, until the point indicated later on.]

HERDISA. I am the mother of that maid with whom thou didst speak erewhile.

OLAF. Her mother! Why, then, greetings to thee!

HERDISA [in a quiet, strained voice]. Come thou blest, and welcome.

OLAF [a little embarrassed by her manner]. Ay, ay; that is kind of thee. Then . . .

Hath she spoken to thee yet?

HERDISA. She hath told all it profits me to know.

OLAF. And doth it like thee? Hast thou aught to say against it?

HERDISA. It likes me. She said thou wert a warrior.

OLAF [eagerly]. And so I am!

HERDISA. Thou hast the bitter voice of such!

OLAF. What, hast thou no love of warriors?

HERDISA. My husband was a skald.

OLAF [taken aback]. So! Ay, 'twill be from him, mayhap, thy little maid . . .

It is a gentle maid!

HERDISA. She hath been all my life! She will be more hereafter.

OLAF [suddenly possessed by a new thought]. Mayhap the word rests not with thee. Perchance her father . . . Ay, he may not . . .

HERDISA [quietly]. She hath no father.

OLAF. Hath no father?

HERDISA. He is dead.

OLAF. Sure, she named her father. She waited for him here.

HERDISA. He is dead.

OLAF. How may that be? When came he by his death?

HERDISA. Slain—scarce an hour ago.

OLAF. Slain!

HERDISA [after a moment]. Ay.

The sword of his slaying lies across my knee. It is yet wet with his blood.

OLAF. But who hath done this deed? What enemy hath . . .

HERDISA. No enemy, but one most near to him.

OLAF. What! . . . THOU!

HERDISA [her eyes dilate].

OLAF [under his breath]. *Thou!*

HERDISA [mastering herself]. I have lifted no hand against him.

OLAF. Forgive me; but thy mood—so strange—so calm . . .

HERDISA. 'Tis no light matter for a woman to lose her mate!

OLAF. Sure, sure. Nor for a child its father! How will Swanhild take this? . . .

HERDISA. There is rest for her to-night. On the morrow she must needs be told. Ay, and more yet, maybe!

OLAF. I take thee; 'tis the blood-atonement thou wouldst name. But the murderer! Where is he?

HERDISA [like a whirlwind]. Yonder, left, over the bridge, up in the pathless ice-hills to the north, he hides—snared like a wolf in the trap!

OLAF. And which of thy kinsmen hast thou speeded thither to hew him to pieces?

HERDISA. None! None! I have none left for such a deed!

OLAF. What friend? What aid of a man, then, hast thou left about thee, at thy need?

HERDISA. None! My child and I stand helpless and alone in all this world!

OLAF. What kind of a man is he—a warrior?

HERDISA. None greater! He stands above all other, like a mountain, topping the feeble hillocks!

OLAF. Mayhap, then, thou wilt deem 'tis no *boy's* work to deal with such a man as he?

HERDISA. I trow not!

OLAF. And thy little maid, she will think as thou?

HERDISA. Doubt it not.

OLAF. Then lo, *I* stand here, thy friend and helper! I will take up the blood-hate for thee against that wolf of murder!

HERDISA. What! Thou wilt?

OLAF. Yea! I might not sing songs out of mine own heart—I am no skald—but I will prove myself a warrior in this deed!

HERDISA. 'Tis the right voice; and yet, indeed, I fear me still . . .

OLAF. There is no cause! Look upon me, friend! Why wilt thou ever turn thine eyes away?

HERDISA. I fear to look upon the man that shall slay—HIM.

OLAF. Is he so terrible? I long to grope with him. How shall I cast thy fears? What proof to give thee ere the deed be done?

HERDISA. Why, some oath might bind thee more —some mighty oath. It might bind both of us!

OLAF. That oath will I give thee.

HERDISA. How high canst thou swear? Knowest thou the White Christ?

OLAF. Nay, I wot not of him. Is he not thy god, here?

HERDISA. Folk say they hold by Him.

OLAF. Nay, I have naught in him.

HERDISA. How, then, wilt thou swear?

OLAF. When I am with my father I take his sword, so, and kiss it, giving my plain word.

HERDISA. Thou wilt hold to that?

OLAF. Sure, a man may not gainsay his word, once given!

HERDISA. Then—here is a sword—swear!

[She rises and hands him the sword without looking at him. OLAF holds

the sword in front of him, kneeling on one knee.]

OLAF. Why, then, thus:

To help thee, friend, in thy most bitter need; to satisfy the blood-hate in thine heart; wrong for wrong; life for life— This is my plain word for thee.

[Kisses sword.]

HERDISA [passionately]. Now! Forth to thy deed!

[OLAF does not move; he is gazing, dumfounded, upon the sword.]

Why dost thou halt? What seest thou there? Art thou afeard?

OLAF. Yea. Whose sword is this?

HERDISA. Why, his—the murderer's! Yon bloody weapon wrought our woe—made fatherless my child—slew, ruthless, Valbrand, my husband!

OLAF. What! . . . *Valbrand!* . . .

HERDISA. Ay, that was my husband's name.

OLAF. And that other . . . that other? . . .

HERDISA. He awaits thee yonder!

OLAF. His name! His name!

HERDISA. Thou wilt know him by his voice. 'Tis a mighty voice, like thine!

OLAF. His name!

HERDISA. Bjorn Asmundsson!

OLAF [dropping the sword]. Ah! I cannot do it!

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HERDISA. What, afeard? Thou hast sworn an oath!

OLAF. It may not be! It may not be!

HERDISA. Thine oath! Thine oath!

OLAF. I take it back! 'Tis void! Void!

HERDISA. I hold thee to it! . . . Ha! . . .

[OLAF lifts up his head and stands facing her. For the first time she sees him.]

WHO—ART—THOU?

OLAF [after a pause, brokenly]. Olaf Bjornsson, the son of him that slew thy mate.

[There is a tense silence for about three heart-beats. Then HERDISA breaks it by an awful laugh.]

HERDISA. Ha, ha, ha! His *bastard!* I thank Thee, God! I deemed Thee dead, up yonder! We lose time! Forth to thy deed!

OLAF. Hearken to me . . . One word . . .

HERDISA. Thy deed!

OLAF. How shall I slay my father, whom I love?

HERDISA. I have an oath against thee!

OLAF. He would but kiss me whiles I did the deed!

HERDISA. Take up thy sword!

OLAF. Nay, by my soul, I will not!

HERDISA. Thine oath!

OLAF. I cast it from me!

HERDISA. *In my bitter need*, thou saidst! The need is come!

OLAF. I spake in darkness!

HERDISA. Lo, *the blood-hate*, here. Thou didst swear to satisfy!

OLAF. By any other way—not this!

HERDISA. *Wrong for wrong! Life for life!* Those were thy words!

[There is a pause. A terrible thought comes to OLAF.]

OLAF [quietly]. Said—I—so?

HERDISA. It was thine oath!

OLAF [putting forth blind hands]. Then—reach me forth—the sword.

HERDISA [after a moment]. What! Wilt thou do it?

OLAF. I have sworn.

[HERDISA picks up the sword and gives it to him fearfully. He takes it without looking at it.]

HERDISA. His son indeed! So looked he those years gone by. Nay, turn thine eyes away.

OLAF. I will trouble thee no more.

[He makes for the door. Half-way

there he hesitates, and goes to bower instead.]

HERDISA. The doors be barred beyond there. Yonder is thy way.

OLAF. All doors be open to me henceforward!

[On the steps of the bower he turns.]

Name me kindly to thy little maid. 'Tis her bower!

[He goes into the bower.]

HERDISA. How said he? . . . *All doors be* . . . *All doors* . . . Nay! Not that! Not that! Stranger! Stay him, God! . . .

[There is heard one short groan, followed by the thud of a falling body. There is a long pause.]

Life for life, he said. Nay, then, it is true—Thou art dead, up yonder!

[The door-latch lifts.]

Some one at the door!

[She runs to the bower, turning a fearful face toward the door when she is upon the steps.]

Ay, and Swanhild, yonder, too! . . .

Ssh! In! In!

[She slips into the bower. At the same moment the door opens and

there stumbles in, haggard, with eyes bloodshot, unkempt, *not* BJORN, but VALBRAND. He staggers heavily to the opening leading into the room. There he leans wearily against the lintel.]

VALBRAND. Accursed! Accursed!

END OF FOURTH ACT

THE FIFTH ACT

The Fragments

THE FIFTH ACT

The scene remains unchanged.

As the curtain rises VALBRAND is discovered leaning against the lintel, as at the end of the last act. After a silent moment or two he staggers to middle of room, hesitates, then moves to table. Lifting the mead-bottle, he is about to pour out mead into a cup, but, changing his mind, he puts down the bottle wearedly. Crossing to fireplace, he sits in the ingle-seat.

VALBRAND. Oh! My foster-brother! My foster-brother!

[Enter SWANHILD from door, right.]

SWANHILD. I cannot sleep. The shapes come thronging; and 'tis dark yonder. Mother! . . .

What! Father, is it thou?

[He gazes with scared eyes upon her.]

I am glad thou hast come back again. It hath been long waiting, for my mother, without thee. [She goes to kiss him.]

VALBRAND. Yonder, child. Kiss not—me.

SWANHILD. Where be they gone? Nay, 'tis some trick of thine to tease me! Where be they?

VALBRAND. They! Who?

SWANHILD. Why, my mother and . . . Ah! Thou gamest with me! Mother hath devised this with thee!

VALBRAND. Thy mother! . . . I have not seen thy mother.

SWANHILD. Why, 'twas but a little while since she was here—she and our new friend. Nay, I know thy mocking, for all thy fierce face! Father!

VALBRAND. Nay, farther off! There is that on my hand would soil thee!

SWANHILD. I care not for thy black hand! Come! 'Tis past laughing-time! Did not my mother bid thee play this trick upon me?

VALBRAND. I say I have not seen thy mother.

SWANHILD. Why, then, that is strange! Where be they, then?

VALBRAND. Say! Hast thou heard nothing? Did they not tell thee aught?

SWANHILD. 'Tis that I would ask *thee.* Did they not tell thee aught?

VALBRAND. Hast thou no fear of me?

SWANHILD. Fear thee! Why should I fear thee?

Thou art my father! And for thou art, I know thou wilt wish the happiness of thy little wench! . . . He hath all God's daylight for me!

VALBRAND. I see thou art yet in the dark; yet little can I read *thy* meaning.

SWANHILD. Nay, come now, where be they in hiding?

VALBRAND. My child, I tell thee I know nothing of thy meaning.

SWANHILD. What! Not of our guest, this evening?

VALBRAND. Speak not of him!

SWANHILD. Nay, but I must! The shining in his eyes hath witched me!

VALBRAND. Peace! Peace! I would not have Bjorn named within these doors again!

SWANHILD. Bjorn! I speak not of Bjorn, but of . . .

VALBRAND. Thou saidst *our guest, this evening* . . .

SWANHILD. Yea, meaning him that came hither when Bjorn was gone.

VALBRAND. What—a *second* guest? . . .

SWANHILD. Nay, then, I see thou hast no dream of what great thing hath happed in our house to-night!

VALBRAND. Not a shadow! What hath happed?

SWANHILD. He lay here, upon the ingle, even half

an hour ago. My mother watched him while he slept.

VALBRAND. What, thy new guest?

SWANHILD. Ay.

VALBRAND. When I came in, the house was empty. Dead men might have lain therein, so quiet it was. What was he?

SWANHILD. My lover! . . . Ah! I have told thee. I had meant to keep it till the morrow. Why dost thou look upon me so? Thou wilt not gainsay our troth?

VALBRAND. Nay, wed whom thou wilt, child. I will not meddle. There shall be no shipwreck for *thee*.

[SWANHILD sits at his feet, on foot-stool.]

SWANHILD [chuckling]. Mother hath no inkling of it yet!

VALBRAND. Ay, thou, at least, shalt be . . . Tell me, who is thy lover?

SWANHILD. Nay, if I tell thee *that*, it will startle thee indeed!

VALBRAND. It will take much to move me now.

SWANHILD. How if I tell thee it was he of whom I dreamed in the bower yonder to-night?

VALBRAND. In the bower? Yea, I remember; thou wert speaking on't to—to him that left us . . .

SWANHILD [nodding gayly]. H'm! To Bjorn! Sure, we shall have *him* back again now—ere long!

VALBRAND [the idea dawning]. Yea, it comes back. . . . He said . . . Bjorn said . . . Ay, and that loved one he spake of, to whom he sang my songs in Vineland! . . .

Child! Child! . . .

SWANHILD. Thou hast guessed it! Father! Father! . . . Wilt thou keep it secret?

VALBRAND. In the name of God, speak it!

SWANHILD. Why, then, my lover, he that came . . . Not one word now until the morrow . . .

VALBRAND. Child! . . .

SWANHILD. He is Bjorn's own son!

[She rattles on, not seeing her father's face of horror above her.]

He hath no guess I am thy daughter! He hath no knowledge of the house he rests in! He deems we live ten leagues away from here! . . . Priest Ufeig lied to him, and sent him hither. I never knew such blessing lay in lies before!

VALBRAND. Thou hast plighted troth with—Bjorn's son!

SWANHILD. 'M! 'M! [Nodding gayly, she slips from the footstool to her knees, and gazes into the fire.]

VALBRAND. Nay, then, God help thee!

SWANHILD. I pray He may. . . . He hath, most lovingly . . .

I sang him my little song ere he fell asleep!

[There is a short silence.]

How silent all is here. 'Tis like the hush of dawn that nestles just betwixt the last of winter and the first of spring!

[A pause.]

They cannot be far off!

[She jumps to her feet and moves about the room.]

Mother! Mother! Olaf! . . . Hide-and-find! Halloo! Halloo! Nay, I will wake you!

[She goes to door, left, and peeps in.]

[Softly.] Motherkin! . . . No answer. . . . Ah, the bower! . . .

[As she approaches it HERDISA appears.]

Ah! Found! Found! . . .

HERDISA. Back! Back! Back! 'Tis no place for thee!

SWANHILD [eagerly]. Where is he? . . .

HERDISA. Nay, farther, farther! Yonder is despair!

SWANHILD. Mother! What is't?

HERDISA. 'Tis Ragnarok! 'Tis the doom of all things come!

SWANHILD. Mother! Motherkin! What hath befallen?

HERDISA. Death hath befallen!

SWANHILD. What dost thou say? . . . Death! . . .

HERDISA. He might have been mine own babe! Once, twice, thrice, in mine arms, I rocked him, so! Never knew I men were earth before! 'Tis cold, ice cold, that sleep!

SWANHILD [stunned]. It was *death* . . . or I dream . . .

HERDISA. Woe, woe, woe for hate and bitterness, and the cruel hunger for men's red blood! Woe for darkness of the soul and the clouded counsels of long-hidden lies! Woe for love—that sting of sorrow! Woe for the mighty harvest, the harvest of death, that hath swept pitiless o'er all the world!

SWANHILD. That word again . . .

HERDISA. I thought to save thee! I thought to spare thee till the morrow!

SWANHILD. Spare not! Speak!

HERDISA. Would that I might lie to thee! But Fate is swift. The truth must out to-night.

SWANHILD. Motherkin! . . .

HERDISA. How shall I strike thee first?

SWANHILD. Like Fate—swiftly . . .

HERDISA. Then, first, know this: thy father . . .

SWANHILD. My father! What of my father!

HERDISA. He is dead!

SWANHILD [with a great cry of gladness]. My father—*dead!*

HERDISA. Yonder, upon the restless bosom of the fiord, he lies with death to-night!

SWANHILD. But, mother, thou art mad! 'Tis madness of thee to call my father dead!

HERDISA. *Thou* art mad, child! What troll hath taken thee? Why wilt thou stand smiling upon me, there?

SWANHILD. Nay, if not mad, 'tis witchcraft! 'Tis some evil spell or dream! Sure, some huge lie hath crept from hell to snare thy soul! *My father dead!* . . .

HERDISA [fiercely]. There is yet more . . . Hearken!

SWANHILD. I seek no more! Ah, joy! Joy! This one lie will I strangle first! Lord! What fear when first thou didst whisper *death!* Methought . . .

Hark now! 'Tis Winterfeast! I deemed this night, already, the joy of all my life was full! There is joy beyond; and that I give to thee, my mother! 'Tis a feast gift for thee, motherkin! Lo, now, I GIVE THEE BACK THY DEAD! Behold!

[She points to the ingle-seat. HER-

DISA takes a step or two down stage, bringing her in front of the guest seat. At the same time VALBRAND, who has been sitting horror-struck, rises, and, moving a little down stage, turns facing HERDISA.]

VALBRAND. Herdisa . . .

[There is a long pause. HERDISA stands spellbound, her hand upon her heart. From this point to the end she speaks with deadly quietness—no emotion—and with a gradual diminuendo.]

SWANHILD [breathless with joy]. Now, give me back my lover! . . .

HERDISA [still gazing on VALBRAND]. Thou art mad. Thou hast no lover.

SWANHILD. Yea—Bjorn's son!

HERDISA. Thou dost not know Bjorn's son.

SWANHILD. Not Olaf! I spake with him to-night! We pledged love together! Look! Here be the ring he gave me.

[She takes it off her arm.]

HERDISA [mechanically]. Ring . . . Ring . . .

[Her eyes are still upon VALBRAND.]

SWANHILD. Take it, mother.

[HERDISA takes it as in a dream. She looks at it without emotion. When she speaks she does so quite simply.]

HERDISA. 'Tis Bjorn's. I gave it him.

[The eyes travel back to VALBRAND.]

SWANHILD. Now, tell me . . . Where is he?

HERDISA. Who?

SWANHILD. Olaf Bjornsson.

HERDISA. In the bower.

SWANHILD. Ah! . . . [She hesitates.] I will join him. [She still hesitates.]

HERDISA [after a pause]. 'Tis Fate.

[SWANHILD goes into the bower. HERDISA stands like a stone.]

VALBRAND [making a slight movement toward her]. Herdisa . . .

HERDISA [slightly receding; she is now in front of the guest seat]. Stand off! Stand off! Come not near!

[He falls back a step.]

What word from hell hast thou come back to utter?

VALBRAND. I have done thy bidding.

HERDISA. What did I bid thee?

VALBRAND. To learn his name on whom thy hate was lodged. My hands be yet scarce dry of his blood.

HERDISA. And his name?

VALBRAND. Bjorn.

[There is a pause.]

HERDISA. Thou—hast—thy—payment.

[A sickly little cry is heard from the bower.]

VALBRAND. What was yon?

[HERDISA's eyes take in the horror. She sinks into the guest seat.]

'Twas like the cry of a little ewe-lamb new-come to slaughter.

HERDISA. It is enough.

[Slowly the head sinks down; the arms relax, the one over the arm of the chair, the other on the side of the table. The ring still remains loosely in one hand. She presents the picture of deep woe.]

VALBRAND [breathlessly]. Yonder, it was.

[He goes into the bower. Enter THORKEL, followed by UFEIG.]

THORKEL. Come thou in, thou prowling dog. This last word in thine ear, and I am free of thee forever.

UFEIG. I shall be glad to hear it.

THORKEL. Valbrand is alive; that much I know; and for the rest—there shall be set up a peace, indeed, in this house henceforward.

UFEIG. How? By yet more lies?

THORKEL. Nay, by truth. I am resolved to tell Herdisa all.

UFEIG. Good! She waits thee yonder [pointing].

[VALBRAND is heard crying out with agony from the bower. A moment later he appears, maddening.]

THORKEL. Ha! My son! My son! . . .

[VALBRAND rushes past him, raving, toward the door.]

Valbrand! Whither away? . . .

VALBRAND [turning]. To the fiord yonder! I go to wash me clean of blood!

THORKEL. Ay, as I thought . . . Bjorn's! . . .

VALBRAND. Nay, thine! *Thine!* THINE!

[He rushes out, crying wildly.]

My child! My child!

THORKEL. What meant he? Mine! How mine? [Inclining toward the door.] Nay, then . . .

UFEIG. Herdisa waits thee yonder. To thy tale.

THORKEL. Yea, but not thou by the while!

UFEIG. How! Shall not thy priest look on?

THORKEL. Thou art no priest of mine!

UFEIG. Have I not proved myself thy priest this night?

THORKEL. How so? Yonder lies thy temple, over the hill. I am of *Thor*.

UFEIG. Howbeit we have served in one temple together this night, Thorkel, and I have been thy priest!

THORKEL. Get thee gone! From this time forth no more darken my doors!

UFEIG. There hath no need.

[He points to his withered arm. One might almost think it moves.]

So! I leave thee.

[He goes out slowly, the door closing noiselessly behind him.]

THORKEL. Now, my girl, hearken! Mayhap it may break thy heart . . . Yet it may no longer be hidden from thee . . . Herdisa . . . Herdisa . . .

[He goes to her side and gently lifts up the bowed head. It drops helplessly, pathetically, upon his breast. She is already dead. From her hand there drops BJORN's ring. It rolls down the stage.]

Herdisa . . .

END OF THE PLAY

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